

Mapping begins to identify 'forest-like' areas in Haryana, to be completed in 2 weeks

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Gurgaon: The forest department has kicked off a field survey to identify areas that can be classified as "forest as per dictionary meaning", in accordance with the state's newly notified definition. The initiative, expected to take approximately two weeks, is being carried out using satellite data of Forest Survey of India (FSI) from 2023.

"The state has created digital polygons, mapped boundaries of potential forest-like patches, which are now being verified through ground-truthing. Forest teams are visiting these locations to confirm if they meet the state's criteria for forests," said a senior forest official.

Upon completion of the verification process, the data will be submitted to a state-level committee for its final approval and compilation. The data will then serve as the foundation for Haryana's official list of areas deemed "forest as per dictionary meaning", as mandated by Supreme Court earlier this year. "This is the next step after the govt notified the forest definition. The polygons have been drawn based on FSI's 2023 data, and the ground verification process has begun. The findings will be placed before the state committee shortly," the official said.

The survey follows an Aug 18 notification in which Haryana, for the first time, formally defined what constitutes a forest beyond govt-notified ones. According to the notification, any land parcel of at least 5ha (if isolated) or 2ha (if adjoining an existing forest) with a canopy density of 0.4 or more qualifies as a forest.

"A patch of land shall be deemed to be forest as per the dictionary meaning if it fulfils these conditions. Firstly, it has a minimum area of 5ha, if it is in isolation, and a minimum area of 2ha, if it is in contiguity with govt-notified forests. Secondly, it has a canopy density of 0.4 or more. Provided that, all linear, compact or agro-forestry plantations and orchards situated outside the govt-notified forests shall not be treated as forest under the definition," stated the notification issued by ACS (environment, forests and wildlife) Anand Mohan Sharan. The definition, notified nearly six decades after Haryana's formation, is more restrictive than the principle defined by SC in its 1996 TN Godavarman vs Union of India case. The SC's ruling held that any area meeting the dictionary meaning of forest, regardless of ownership or legal status, must be protected under the Forest (Conservation) Act.

Experts criticised state's criteria, arguing that it excludes scrublands, grasslands and smaller forest patches that constitute much of the Aravali landscape. They have warned that these ecologically fragile zones may lose legal protection if they don't meet the 5ha size or 40% canopy density threshold.

"The process of identifying deemed forests is welcome, but the state's definition itself is flawed. The Aravalis are largely open or scrub forests with 10–30% canopy cover. By setting such a high threshold, Haryana risks leaving out the very ecosystems that need protection most," said environmentalist Vivek Kamboj.

In March, SC directed all states and union territories to identify such forests within four months to ensure green cover outside notified forests is not lost to urbanisation or land-use change.

Although Haryana is home to 1 lakh ha of the Aravali hills, more than half of this range (55,000 ha) in the state lacks protection under Forest Conservation Act (FCA). This situation is partly due to the ownership anomaly in Haryana, where Aravali land was never designated as 'forest' by the state. Most of the Aravali area falls under the jurisdiction of the revenue department rather than the forest department.

The only Aravali lands protected in the state are due to court rulings, such as the special sections 4 and 5 of the Punjab Land Preservation Act (PLPA), 1990, and the Aravali Notification of 1992.