

More green cover needed, find land to create alternative forest for Delhi, HC tells authorities

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NEW DELHI: In a significant move emphasizing the need for increased green spaces in the nation's capital, the Delhi high court has called upon authorities to identify suitable land for the establishment of a new forest area, distinct from the existing ridge. Justice Jasmeet Singh, addressing the conservator of the forest, conveyed the high expectations of Delhi's populace and urged him to expedite the matter.

Justice Singh inquired, "Why is there no effort being made to develop an alternative to the central ridge? Delhi requires an alternative forest, and available land must be utilized. How can we combat pollution and improve citizens' lives beyond government initiatives? The greater the green cover, the better the quality of life. Why is this aspect being overlooked?"

The conservator of the forest acknowledged instances of encroachment upon parts of the ridge and informed the court about certain locations in the capital designated as deemed forest areas.

The counsel representing the Delhi government clarified that the city's police had never refused to provide assistance, but the responsibility for removing encroachments from the ridge lay with the relevant authority. The ridge, often referred to as the lungs of the national capital, is an extension of the Aravalli hill range, characterized by rocky terrain, hills, and lush forests. It is divided into four zones—south, south-central, central, and north—for administrative purposes, encompassing a total area of approximately 7,784 hectares.

Justice Singh instructed the conservator of the forest to furnish details to the court regarding the number of trees planted, forest land lost and reclaimed, and the proposed area for the development of an alternative forest. He stressed the urgency of the matter, stating, "This must be addressed with utmost urgency. You need to identify land for an alternative forest, specify the area you intend to use, and its size."

Additionally, the court requested the official to provide the journal maintained by the authorities, which documents tree plantation and maintenance efforts.

The judge suggested utilizing the over Rs 2 crore available in the 'Delhi Green Fund,' established by the high court, for tree plantation and instructed the forest official to submit an affidavit addressing the raised concerns.

The official informed the court that over 2,700 trees had been planted alongside roads, following the court's earlier directive to plant 10,000 trees. The court deemed this number insufficient for a city like Delhi and stressed the need for planting a significantly larger quantity of trees.

Aditya N Prasad, the amicus curiae assisting the court in this matter, raised concerns about the staffing and functioning of the forest department, describing it as understaffed.

Advocate Gautam Narayan, another amicus curiae in the case related to tree plantation in the city, also participated in the proceedings.

Earlier this year, the high court had instructed authorities to plant a minimum of 10,000 trees in the city, utilizing over Rs 70 lakh collected from defaulting litigants as costs for the greater public good.

The next hearing for this matter is scheduled for September 27.

(With inputs from PTI)