

New policy to improve forest cover in Sindh finalised

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KARACHI: The Sindh government is planning to introduce a new forest policy to protect recently recovered thousands of acres from encroachers and to address the critical issue of climate change, it emerged on Sunday.

Sources said that the proposed Sindh Sustainable Forest Management Policy was in compliance with the Supreme Court's order specifically required retrieving forest lands (illegal allotments by the Board of Revenue and encroached lands) and bring the forests back in view of the climate change.

The policy underlined the urgency of bringing vacated areas under afforestation process as quickly as possible as there were apprehensions that vacated areas might be re-encroached given their vastness and remoteness in lawless kacha areas of the province.

The policy proposed the option community participation in afforestation as well as protection of existing forest stock in riverine and irrigated plantation. Thus, the proposed policy focus for community led/community involved partnership approach to restore forests in riverine areas of Sindh.

It said that the alternate to community participation was a massive fiscal investment by the government, but it was not possible to undertake such a massive investment in forest rehabilitation.

The total forest area in Sindh was 888,206 acres and on the directives of the apex court 218,000 acres had been retrieved from encroachers.

In addition to the retrieved land, 382,000 acres unutilized forest land available in Sindh, the sources said, adding that hence the total land ready for afforestation was approximately 600,000 acres.

The sources apprehended that in the absence of an approved policy on a partnership approach or provision of funding by the government for rehabilitation of forests, it was likely that the vacated areas and unutilized forest land might be re-encroached or re-occupied by the encroachers once again.

Rs18bn sought for forests rehabilitation

Therefore, the forest department had moved a summary seeking approval of the draft policy to bring the vacated and unutilized forest areas under tree cover through the partnership approach.

It also sought Rs18 billion in phases in three years —Rs6bn per annum — for rehabilitation forests by the department through its own staff.

Official documents revealed that the first-ever scientific inventory of forests in Sindh was conducted in 1994 with the technical assistance of the Asian Development Bank under a Sindh forestry development project.

Its results indicated that 21 per cent area (43,000 hectares) of riverine forests and 17pc area (13,000 hectares) of irrigated plantations were under cover of “productive/commercial tree species” and the remaining forest area was “degraded and occupied by non-commercial woody vegetation”.

Since then, no further scientific inventory of the state forests in Sindh had been conducted. However, in 2007 it was reported that the forests covered 2.5pc of the total area in Sindh.

Host of reasons have been cited behind the decline in the forest cover in Sindh such as “poor governance, weak law enforcement capacity of the forest department, decline in river flows and low priority assigned to forestry sector in financial resources allocation”.

Furthermore, demographic changes, hydrological changes, market forces, lack of alternatives of forest products and “land hunger” were stated to be contributory factors behind the decline of forests in the province.

Moreover, it has been pointed out in the official documents that the agro-forestry lease policy of 2005 had been proved “counter-productive and detrimental for the forests”, resultantly local communities who were traditionally dependent on the forests for their livelihood, wood for domestic use and fodder for livestock had suffered immensely.

Referring to a global paradigm shift for forest management, the draft policy pointed out that forests were considered as vital for the provision of environmental services such as climate deregulation, soil and water conservation, biodiversity conservation, pollution control and protection against natural disasters.

Thus, providing timber, fuel-wood and fodder was no longer considered as the key objective of managing forests.

Under these circumstances, it suggested that “a well-defined direction, strong political and professional commitment” was required for betterment of the society through conservation of forests.

The Sindh High Court had on Jan 30 also barred cultivation of crops on forest lands or its use for agriculture purposes.

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