

Timber production forests find place in Forest Act draft

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The state government also has the right to impose cess or taxes on the forest land used for such production.(Getty Images/iStockphoto)

New Delhi The draft Indian Forest Act 2019, an amendment to the Indian Forest Act 1927 includes so-called production forests, mainly commercial production of timber, pulp, pulpwood and other non-forest produce, in its definition of forests. This means commercial plantations will also be counted as forests.

The draft also states that production forests can be notified in reserve forests, even inside protected forests. State governments can notify production forests for a specified period; the area for plantation will be considered based on forest productivity and privileges of the local communities, says the draft.

The state government also has the right to impose cess or taxes on the forest land used for such production.

These provisions have got environmentalists worried.

“The draft which has been sent to state governments is only a technical document. We will not proceed before receiving state governments’ comments. Production forests have been in discussion because we are trying to bring in a policy on commercial plantations. Local communities will also have a say and will participate in it. The amendments make way for it,” said Siddhanta Das, director general of forests and special secretary, environment ministry.

The ministry has drafted a policy for public-private partnership (PPPs) to develop plantations in “degraded” forests. This awaits Cabinet approval and will be taken up after the elections. The draft forest policy also facilitates forest-industry interface. The BJP’s manifesto recently faced flak for promoting diversion of forests and indicating that plantations in lieu of diversion of native forests had added to the country’s forest cover.

The BJP manifesto read: “We have ensured speed and effectiveness in issuing forest and environmental clearances for eligible projects due to which we have added around 9000 sq km to the forest cover of the country.”

Focusing on the commercial aspect misses the wood for the trees, some experts say.

“Forests invoke different meaning including biodiversity, water, livelihoods, home, culture. The idea of production forests reduces it single association that is based on the idea of financial gains. The Indian Forest Act was always about monetising forests; this present amendment has a strong footprint of the same. The ministry has pushed for it in the draft National Forest Policy as well. This could have been an important opportunity to invoke the conservation potential

that supports local livelihoods, reduces conflicts with wildlife which is the need of the hour,” said Kanchi Kohli, legal researcher at Centre for Policy Research (CPR).

One of the authors of the draft disagrees. “I think people can be involved in production forestry. Production forestry means increasing productivity of timber and forests,” said Sanjay Upadhyay, SC advocate and member of the drafting committee.

Still, there are worrying aspects to the proposed changes.

“If production forests are located in protected or reserve forest areas it’s not good idea. There will be fragmentation of forests. It can also open the gates for illegal smuggling,” said Professor, NH Ravindranath of the Indian Institute of Science (IISc).

The draft has been criticized for entrusting forest officers with draconian powers. For example, any officer has the right to arrest without warrant on the basis of suspicion and state governments can also equip forest officials with arms for implementing the provisions of this law.

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