

## 315 hectares forest land to be diverted for Mumbai-Vadodara expressway

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Environmentalists raise alarm over the loss of this green cover, particularly in the light of where these contiguous projects are located, in the Dahanu ESZ, the Matheran ESZ and around the wetlands of Uran in Navi Mumbai



Mumbai: A total of 315 hectares of forest land and over 80k trees will be felled across Palghar, Thane and Raigad districts to make way for the Mumbai-Vadodara Expressway (MVE), confirmed the National Highways Authority of India (NHAI).

Clearing of forest is expected to commence within the next two months, while remaining clearances for felling of mangroves is pending with Bombay High Court (HC) and stage-1 forest clearance with the forest department.

The MVE is an eight-lane, 379-km greenfield expressway between Vadodara and Mumbai planned under the National Highways Development Project (NHDP) Phase VI and the Phase II, and will reduce travel time between the two cities to four hours from the current seven hours through the national highway (NH)-8.

The 315 hectares of forest proposed to be diverted are divided into two land parcels, including the main expressway's length from Talasari to Vasai in Palghar district, comprising 193 hectares of forest (including 3.95 hectares of mangroves).

The second land parcel comprises 112 hectares of land, which will be felled to make way for the MVE's connecting spur between Vasai and the Jawaharlal Nehru Port in Raigad district.

NHAI official privy to the matter, requesting anonymity shared that for the Vasai-Talasari land parcel, they have received approval from the Maharashtra Coastal Zone Management Authority, the Dahanu Taluka Environmental Protection Authority, as well as stage-1 forest clearance. However, since the proposal for forest clearance involves removal of about 1,000 mangrove trees, they need to have the HC's permission as well. There have been about three or four hearings in the matter already, and they expect to get a go ahead after a couple of more hearings.

They added that about 38,000 trees will be felled to make way for the MVE between Talasari and Vasai, though the total number of trees present within the right of way (RoW) alignment comes to 88,349. The project's EIA report, dated November 2019, mentions that 90,899 trees and 49,408 hedges have been proposed to be planted under a greenbelt development plan, while 1,91,589 plants are proposed to be planted under a separate compensatory afforestation plan.

Though forest clearance has been obtained allowing the tree felling to commence, this project is still awaiting environment clearance (EC) from the centre without which, further construction work cannot proceed.

The NHAI had applied for clearances under the FC Act for 94.5ha forest diversion in 2018, but retracted the proposal as a much larger forest area was subsequently earmarked for diversion.

CRZ clearance for this proposal was granted by the MCZMA in July 2020, while the DTEPA's sanction was given in August 2021.

The official cited above informed, "For the second land parcel, from Vasai to JNPT, between 50-60,000 trees will be felled in Palghar, Thane and Raigad. This land parcel does not require permission either from the Dahanu authority or HC. The proposal is awaiting stage-1 forest clearance, but we are expecting that to come soon as well. We can safely say that the work orders will be issued and that clearing of the forest land will commence within the next two months."

The Vasai-JNPT extension of the Mumbai-Vadodara Expressway will also pass through Matheran eco-sensitive zone, and involves tunnelling through the Matheran Hill for about 4.39 km.

Permission for the same has been accorded by the MoEFCC appointed Matheran Monitoring Committee in April 2013, and the alignment has also been included in the Zonal Master Plan for the Matheran ESZ, the project's pre-feasibility report reveals. In November 2021, this portion of the MVE was recommended for environmental clearance by the MoEFCC's expert appraisal committee.

"There are approximately 55,355 trees within the proposed RoW; out of which 13,839 trees are in forest land and 41,516 trees in non-forest land," the EAC's minutes had noted under the head 'Tree cutting'. The EIA report for the project, dated August 2021, mentions that the "proposed project involves felling of approx. 61,078 no. of trees," adding that 69,680 trees and 40,098 hedges have been proposed to be planted to offset this loss under a green belt development plan. In addition, 2,45,226 plants are proposed to be planted under a separate compensatory afforestation plan.

Environmentalists and experts have raised an alarm over the loss of this green cover, particularly in the light of where these contiguous projects are located, in the Dahanu ESZ, the Matheran ESZ and around the wetlands of Uran in Navi Mumbai.

Debi Goenka, executive trustee of the Conservation Action Trust, pointed out that the Dahanu ESZ is being fragmented by the multiple linear intrusions other than this expressway, including the Mumbai-Ahmedabad bullet train, the Western Dedicated Freight Corridor, a CNG pipeline between Gujarat and Maharashtra, and another set of pipelines to carry water from the Surya Dam to Vasai-Virar and Mira-Bhayander. "Environmental and forest clearances for these projects need to be considered keeping in mind their cumulative impact on the ecosystem. Such piecemeal clearances defeat the intent of the MoEFCC's 1991 notification declaring the region as eco-sensitive," said Debi. While Navi Mumbai based environmentalist BN Kumar, founder of the non-profit NatConnect Foundation, said that the ecology of Raigad district around Uran taluka is also being similarly fragmented. "You have the JNPT SEZ and Navi Mumbai SEZ coming up in an area dotted by degrading coastal wetlands, the Navi Mumbai Airport, the Mumbai-Trans Harbour Link, the Dedicated Freight Corridor and also the MVE extension from Vasai to JNPT. There has been no attempt to assess the cumulative impact of such rapid infra and industrial expansion on the coastal ecology, the avian biodiversity, or the communities which live there," he said.

Source: <https://www.hindustantimes.com/cities/mumbai-news/315-hectares-forest-land-to-be-diverted-for-mumbai-vadodara-expressway-101643467748443.html>