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Centre gives in-principle clearance for diversion of 237.086 hectares of forest land and felling of nearly 40,000 trees for Vadhavan Port corridor in Maharashtra

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Navi Mumbai: The Union government's in-principle clearance for diversion of 237.086 hectares of forest land and the felling of nearly 40,000 trees for the proposed Vadhavan Port connectivity corridor has triggered strong opposition from environmentalists, who warned of irreversible ecological damage and escalation in wildlife-human conflict in the ecologically sensitive Dahanu-Palghar region.

The clearance covers an eight-lane highway and railway corridor linking the upcoming Rs 76,220-crore Vadhavan Port in Palghar district with Jawaharlal Nehru Port Authority (JNPA). According to official records, 38,905 trees, including nearly 1,600 mangroves, will

be felled for the project.

NatConnect Foundation director B N Kumar termed the project "one of the biggest assaults" on green cover in the region in recent years. "The highway and railway corridor will stand on massive concrete pillars replacing

densenatural canopy. We are already witnessing rising temperatures and worsening air quality because of rapid destruction of greenery. Such projects will only deepen the environmental crisis," he said.

Environmentalist Nandakumar Pawar, director of Sagar Shakti, said authorities should have explored alternative alignments and taken local stakeholders into confidence before finalising the route. "We are not against development, but it must be balanced with nature. Alternative alignments and mitigation measures should have been discussed transparently before granting approvals," he said, demanding a review of the clearance process.

Both Kumar and Pawar warned that large-scale destruction of forest habitat could sharply escalate human-animal conflict in the region in the coming years.

As per the official documents accessed by TOI, land proposed for diversion includes 131.83 hectares of reserved forest, 82.24 hectares of protected forest and 13.76 hectares of private forest land, besides mangrove areas. The forests support native species such as teak, khair, palas, ain, shisham and savar. Wildlife recorded in the affected landscape includes leopards, striped hyenas, jungle cats, wild boars and bonnet macaques. Reptiles such as the Indian Rock Python, Russell's Viper and Indian Monitor Lizard are also found in the area, along with bird species like kingfishers, spotted owls, parakeets and bulbuls.

The Centre has justified the project as critical infrastructure under the Sagarmala programme for improving cargo evacuation from the proposed deep-draft port. Government documents state that existing two-lane roads in the region pass through built-up areas and lack the capacity to safely handle heavy freight traffic.

However, the government's own alignment analysis acknowledges that all proposed routes cut through ecologically sensitive stretches of Dahanu taluka and forest landscapes. The selected alignment, called Option-II, was chosen because it allegedly caused the "minimum impact" on mangroves and local settlements, despite still requiring diversion of 237 hectares of forest land. The clearance imposes several mitigation measures, including wildlife underpasses, fencing to guide animal movement, restrictions on dumping debris in forests and safeguards for the Surya river flow.

JNPA has deposited Rs 134.52 crore towards compensatory afforestation with the Compensatory Afforestation Fund Management and Planning Authority (CAMPA), Maharashtra.

Environmentalists, however, questioned whether compensatory plantations could ever replace mature forests and mangrove ecosystems that evolved over decades. "People may have to wait 10 to 15 years before freshly planted saplings begin providing even a fraction of the ecological benefits of the trees being destroyed today," green groups said.