



Drive for Haryana's green cover? Experts demand protected status first

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GURUGRAM: Eight south Haryana districts, including Gurugram and Faridabad, have been set a target of restoring a total of 11,272 hectares of the Aravali land over the next five years under the Centre's Green Indian Mission (GIM). But experts have raised questions on the effectiveness of the project, pointing out that the state's green cover would not increase until the areas where the saplings are being planted are given a "protected" status.

Officials said this was the first time that restoration of the Aravalis had been included in the GIM. Launched in 2014, the mission undertakes all kinds of afforestation activities under the National Action Plan on Climate Change (NAPCC).

The primary aim is to protect, restore and enhance India's diminishing forest cover. As of now, GIM is one of the eight missions identified under NAPCC across the country.

Apart from Gurugram and Faridabad, the other districts that have been included in the project are Bhiwani, Nuh, Rewari, Palwal, Dadri and Mahendragarh. Of the 11,272 hectares that is supposed to be restored, Nuh has the highest area with 2,817 hectares, followed by Bhiwani (2,414 hectares), Rewari (1,602 hectares), Dadri (1,375 hectares), Faridabad (989 hectares), Palwal (699 hectares) and Gurugram (485 hectares).

Over the next five years, the officials said, work would be carried out on several aspects, such as restoration of degraded open forests, grasslands and abandoned mining areas. "This is the first time that the Aravali landscape has been included under GIM. The Haryana government has submitted a proposal on this and it will be initiated over the next five years. We had never got GIM funds earlier. This is the first time that Haryana will get funds from the Centre for a green action plan," said Suresh Dalal, additional principal chief conservator of forests.

The Haryana government's decision to send a proposal to the Centre to help in conserving the Aravalis comes months after it submitted an affidavit in the Supreme Court that all areas covered under the Punjab Land Preservation Act (PLPA) could not be considered as "forest land". Environmentalists pointed this out, saying the initiative would hardly see success in the long run unless the areas covered by the GIM drive were accorded the status of "forests" and were protected from construction activities.

"Creating a mission for the entire country is not an ideal way to increase the green cover in a state. Every state has its own land-use issues and should form its own methodology for enhancing green cover. Also, how can this project provide protection to an area after plantation of saplings? Most of the areas to be covered by the drive are either private or panchayat land," said RP Balwan, a former forest conservator.

As of now, only some portion of the Aravalis is protected. So, where are they going to do the plantation? The forest department can plant saplings and enhance the green cover, but they have to develop some mechanism to ensure the saplings in private areas are protected. This gives a completely distorted picture of the status of forests," he added.

Another environmentalist, Vivek Kamboj, said, “What happens to the initiative if the private owner of a plot decides to remove the saplings? How can this improve the green cover? The state government does not have any machinery to check tree felling on their own land, let alone private areas.”

According to forest department officials, any land, irrespective of its ownership, can be part of the GIM. For instance, the drive can be carried out in private properties such as schools, commercial establishments and on panchayat plots too.

Told about the questions raised by the activists, chief conservator of forests Vasavi Tyagi said, “We are working on plans to increase green cover, not to give the area a ‘forest cover’ status. We will just carry out plantations, irrespective of the ownership of the land.”

The entire project across the eight districts is estimated to cost Rs 989 crore. The Centre will disburse the money after going through the proposal sent by the Haryana government, officials said.

According to the target set by the Haryana government, a total of 960 hectares of abandoned mining sites in Nuh and 42 hectares in Faridabad will be restored under GIM. Gurugram, which has the lowest target, aims at restoring open forests on 132 hectares and carry out agro-forestry across 353 hectares, according to the proposal sent by the forest department to the Centre.

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