

Eco-activists say CIDCO is yet to transfer 1,680 ha mangroves to forest dept

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NAVI MUMBAI: The City and Industrial Development Corporation of Maharashtra (CIDCO) is yet to transfer 1,680 hectares of mangroves in Panvel taluka, equivalent to the size of 168 Azad Maidans, to the forest department, claim environmentalists. This violates the Bombay high court (HC) order that directed the agency to transfer the mangroves to the forest department.

CIDCO on the other hand rubbished any such claim and said all the mangroves under its possession have been transferred.

According to the documents obtained by NatConnect Foundation, as per the Maharashtra Remote Sensing Application Centre (MRSAC) map of 2005, over 2,595 hectares of mangroves existed in Panvel taluka, of which CIDCO handed over 582.5 ha to the forest department. Plus, the revenue department earmarked 428 ha which is yet to be given to the forest department.

To oversee the increasing load, the Navi Mumbai cell of the Mangrove Conservation Unit has also put up a request with the Divisional Forest Officer (DFO) Mumbai for an additional staff of nearly 30 to oversee the conservation of mangroves.

Thus, over 1680 hectares of mangroves are still under CIDCO's possession in the Panvel area. NatConnect Foundation director BN Kumar said, "We have been complaining to all authorities about the tardy progress in the mangrove transfer process in Raigad district and almost all government agencies are in a denial mode."

This is not a small area and it is like a bombshell since CIDCO told the world, via a tweet on May 24, that it completed the process of handing over the mangroves in the Navi Mumbai Project area, Kumar pointed out.

Citing the forest department documents, Kumar said Gavan area has the largest 429 ha of mangroves of which CIDCO handed over 71 ha followed by Vaghivali with 371.19 ha of which again only 71 ha has been transferred. CIDCO continues to hold 158 ha at Kamothe and 152.45 ha at Kharghar.

As much as 721.23 ha are covered with dense mangroves, 678.03 ha are sparse and 219.43 ha in mudflats, according to Virendra Tiwari, additional principal chief conservator of forests.

CIDCO has so far handed over 582.935 ha and has given NOC for 382.00 ha, Tiwari confirmed to NatConnect.

"This is a very strange situation that CIDCO gives NOC as if it is doing a favour, whereas it has to just abide by the high court order," said Nandakumar Pawar, head of Sagar Shakti, the marine division of NGO Vanashakti.

The high court had ordered a total freeze on the destruction of mangroves on September 18, 2018, and directed that the sea plants should be transferred to the forest department following a petition by Bombay Environment Action Group (BEAG), Pawar pointed out.

Yet, CIDCO has been very slow in the mangrove handing over process that gives ample opportunity for land grabbers to be active, NatConnect said in its fresh e-mail to the high court-appointed mangrove protection and conservation committee.

Vanashakti director Stalin D had moved the High Court seeking the transfer of all mangroves to the Forest Department and pointing out the wilful negligence on part of various government agencies.

Kharghar-based activists Nareshchandra Singh and Jyoti Nadkarni who have been relentlessly mobilising public support to save the mangroves and wetlands regretted that CIDCO has been defying the court order. The delay in protecting the mangroves is causing immense harm to nature by debris and land mafias, Singh said.

Range Forest Officer SL Manjare of Navi Mumbai Mangrove Conservation Unit has also written to the Revenue sub-divisional officer to take action against debris dumping and the land grab of mangrove zones.

The Kharghar police have earlier refused to entertain Manjare's complaint as the Forest Department has no powers to file cases under the Environment Protection Act.

The Revenue Department on its part passed the buck to CIDCO since the mangroves in question are under its jurisdiction.

CIDCO: All mangroves handed over

"About 1458-hectare area of mangrove land in Thane taluka under CIDCO possession has already been transferred to the forest department in the past. As per the directions given by the environment minister, the process of handing over mangrove land of about 908 ha has been completed by CIDCO. Out of this, 279 Ha. of land is in the possession of CIDCO and the remaining mangrove land is private and hence given NOC," said an officer.

"So far, CIDCO has handed over 1258 ha. of mangrove lands in Panvel and Uran tehsils and with this CIDCO has completed the process of handing over all mangrove lands in Navi Mumbai," added the officer.

According to a CIDCO source, "As per MRSAC survey, the total area under mangroves (sparse+dense) in Panvel Tehsil of Navi Mumbai is only 1365 ha and not 1680 ha.

Source: <https://www.hindustantimes.com/cities/mumbai-news/ecoactivists-say-cidco-is-yet-to-transfer-1-680-ha-mangroves-to-forest-dept-101666205994264.html>