

Forest land diverted for waste plant 14 yrs ago, no plantation carried out yet

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Gurgaon: Compensatory plantation for the diversion of forest land to set up the waste treatment plant at Bandhwari has not been carried out, a decade and a half since the Union ministry of environment permitted the Haryana forest department to use 7.7 hectares in the Aravalis for processing of garbage generated by the city.

In 2008, when the permission was granted, there were around 6,000 trees and shrubs on the tract where a landfill now stands. In 2008, the ministry of environment, forest and climate change (MoEFCC) directed the forest department to plant 12,808 trees (twice the number of trees that were felled for the waste plant) in Nuh's Rozka Meo village within a year of diversion of the land, as well as convert 7.7 hectares of non-forest land in Gurgaon into protected or reserved forest.

While MCG has handed over the required 7.7 hectares to the forest department, no plantations have been conducted in compensation for the landfill even 14 years after the directions, a response by the forest department to an RTI query has revealed. While Gurgaon didn't have enough land for plantation, the Nuh village was selected as it had land available and its forest cover was depleting.

Compensatory afforestation is done against the transfer of forest land for non-forestry purposes like the development of dams, mining and the construction of industries or roads. It is critical to sustain the percentage of green cover in fast concretising Indian cities.

"The forest land given for waste treatment in 2008 has been the recipient of garbage daily, accumulating millions of tonnes of toxic pollutants. A decade and a half ago, the land on which the landfill now stands was a carbon sink and groundwater recharge haven," said Roma J Vinayak, an environmental activist who filed the RTI query.

At a time when the effects of climate change are manifesting in extreme weather events, like the multiple spells of heatwave witnessed this season, the failure of compensatory plantation is a danger sign for the ecology, environmentalists said. “It’s shocking that the authorities can’t even save face with respect to the easiest terms of the forest clearance,” said Vaishali Rana Chandra, another activist.

MCG has already deposited the funds needed for plantation with the Haryana Compensatory Afforestation Fund Management and Planning Authority. Forest officials, meanwhile, said there is a backlog in compensatory afforestation due to unavailability of land.

Vijender, the divisional forest officer of Nuh, said: “We have plantations pending in our own district. This compensatory plantation drive is from another district (Gurgaon), which is why it’s still pending. We are working to ensure that all compensatory plantations till 2020 are carried out in the next two years. We have the funds, but availability of land is the problem here.”

Norms laid by the ministry state that 1,100 plants can be planted over an area of one hectare as compensatory plantation. This means the forest department needs at least 11.6 hectares of forest land for the plantation, while Rozka Meo has less than eight hectares available at present. Moreover, the land on which afforestation is to take place should have less than 40% forest cover. The unavailability of such land has resulted in the delay, forest officials said.