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## Forest panel bats for pvt plantations as compensation

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The Forest Advisory Committee (FAC) has recommended that private players be allowed to raise plantations to be later used for compensatory afforestation (CA). This has raised concerns among green activists.

Whenever forest land is diverted for non-forestry purposes like mining or infrastructure development under the provisions of the Forest (Conservation) Act, 1980, an equal area of non-forest land or twice the area of degraded forest land has to be planted over as CA. The idea is to offset the loss of diverted forest cover.

The process starts with the project proponent identifying land for CA and proposing the same to the state forest department. If the department approves the proposal, the project proponent pays for the land, which is transferred to the forest department. The forest department then undertakes plantation work on that land.

The FAC discussed the 'Green Credit Scheme' in a December 19, 2019 meeting. It was first developed by the Gujarat state government and was pending for approval from the MoEF&CC since 2013.

The scheme, as recommended by FAC in its meeting, will allow private agencies to create tree plantations on private / non-forest land, to be used as CA for projects involving forest diversion.

"After a thorough deliberation and discussion, FAC recommended that such plantations shall be accepted on non-forest area. FAC believes that such schemes will encourage plantation by individuals outside the traditional forest area and will help in contributing towards meeting the international commitments of the country such as Sustainable Development Goals and Nationally Determined Contributions," the minutes of the FAC meeting noted.

The decision was based on the problems faced in undertaking CA like the flow of funds causing delay in setting up plantations which further lead to encroachment on land identified for CA. The issue of CA lands being isolated patches, therefore difficult to protect, was also discussed.

The FAC is a body under the Union Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change (MoEF&CC) and is responsible for regulating forest diversion.

The FAC was of the opinion that setting up plantations in advance will take care of these issues.

### **Activists express concern**

“The government has been trying to do this for a long time,” said Tushar Dash of Community Forest Rights — Learning and Advocacy, an advocacy group of experts and activists working for creating awareness about the Forest Rights Act.

“Guidelines were brought in 2015, but were withdrawn due to resistance. This mechanism was also mentioned in the draft of the National Forest Policy, 2017, and the draft amendment to the Indian Forest Act. This new mechanism, where the CA money can be exchanged between the private agency and the project proponent, can lead to a situation where money keeps circulating within a private company,” he added.

There are also issues of ambiguity, about how this mechanism will materialise on the ground. The FAC minutes do not have any details about the ownership over the land and where the land will be sourced from, Dash said.

“The FAC is talking about plantations over Non-Forest Land. The purpose of CA is not to categorise more land under forest, but to take care of the loss of ecosystem services caused by the diversion. The Green Credit Scheme isn’t available and it may have more clarity on this particular issue,” Rohini Chaturvedi of Global EverGreening Alliance, an international non-profit working for land restoration and sustainable agriculture, said.

Concerns are also being raised that this would lead to the privatisation of forests and give impetus to their destruction.

“The problems with undertaking CA have been there for some time and this new mechanism is trying to resolve those. But it doesn’t have any solution to the problems like land rights, issues of biodiversity. This will lead to privatisation of forests and can also lead to their destruction,” Kanchi Kohli, senior researcher, Namati Environmental Justice Programme, Centre for Policy Research, said.

According to Dash, this could also lead to a grab of village commons. “With the government undertaking the CA there are already a lot of violations of land rights of communities, with the private players taking the place of the government, these violations are only going to increase. They have talked about land in forest fringes. These lands can be commons lands, but they will be gone.”

The discussions of FAC show that the money involved will be discussed between the private agencies raising these plantations and the project proponent. If the economic value of these plantations becomes lucrative, it can pose a serious threat to agricultural land, by diverting the latter for plantations.

“There has to be a mechanism here to ensure that the incentive structure for undertaking plantations isn’t such that it’d lead to conversion of agricultural land to forests, impacting the food security of the country,” Chaturvedi said.

“Why are they doing it? In its explanation of adopting this mechanism, the FAC says that the flow of funds was limiting the CA activity. But the process of fund allocation for CA has been

turned into a statutory law, the Compensatory Afforestation Fund act, 2016. Does it mean that the Act is not working?

Moreover, the FAC discussion shows that the plantations will be ready to be traded after three years.

“If a private company wants to do plantation, it’ll do so to make profit and they’ll surely grow species which will mature quickly within three years. This will lead to more plantations of eucalyptus which can grow faster,” Dash says.

According to a MoEF&CC official, this mechanism is still in its initial phase and rules are yet to be made.

“There would be monitoring of plantations, which wasn’t done earlier and make it easy for individuals to plant and harvest trees, which earlier was difficult due to the provisions of the Forest (Conservation) Act, 1980. Other concerns will be taken care of too. We are still at an initial stage. There would be a mechanism that’ll make sure that agricultural land isn’t diverted,” the official said on condition of anonymity.

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