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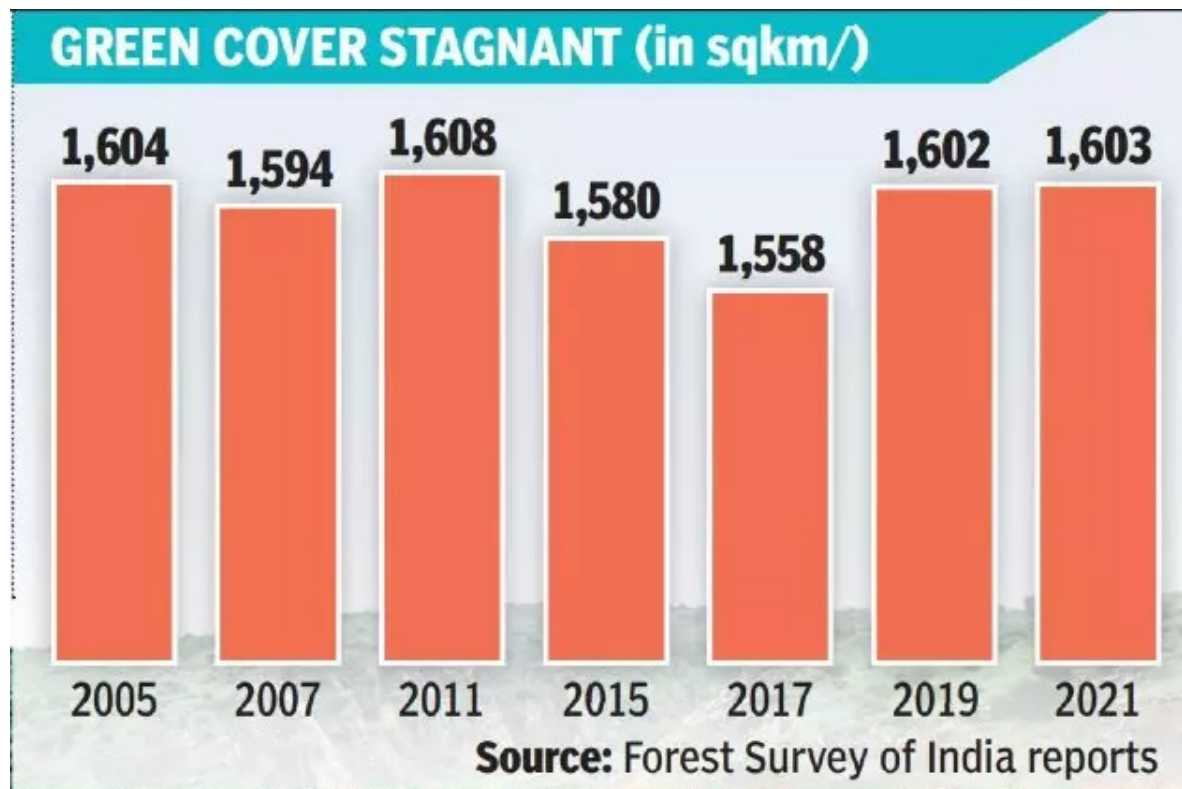
# Green cover didn't increase, rethink plantation strategy: Panel member

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GURUGRAM: The Haryana government needs to rethink its proposal on spending funds for compensatory afforestation drives, an objection note by steering committee member and IAS officer Ashok Khemka said, pointing out that the state has not been able to increase its green cover over the past two decades.

The 10-member committee reviews the proposal on Compensatory Afforestation Fund Management and Planning Authority (CAMPA) funds before it is sent for approval to the Union ministry of environment.



Compensatory plantation is carried out whenever forest land is diverted for development work. The funds for these plantation drives are given to a state by the agency that is carrying out development work. An annual proposal of the details is submitted to the central government for approval.

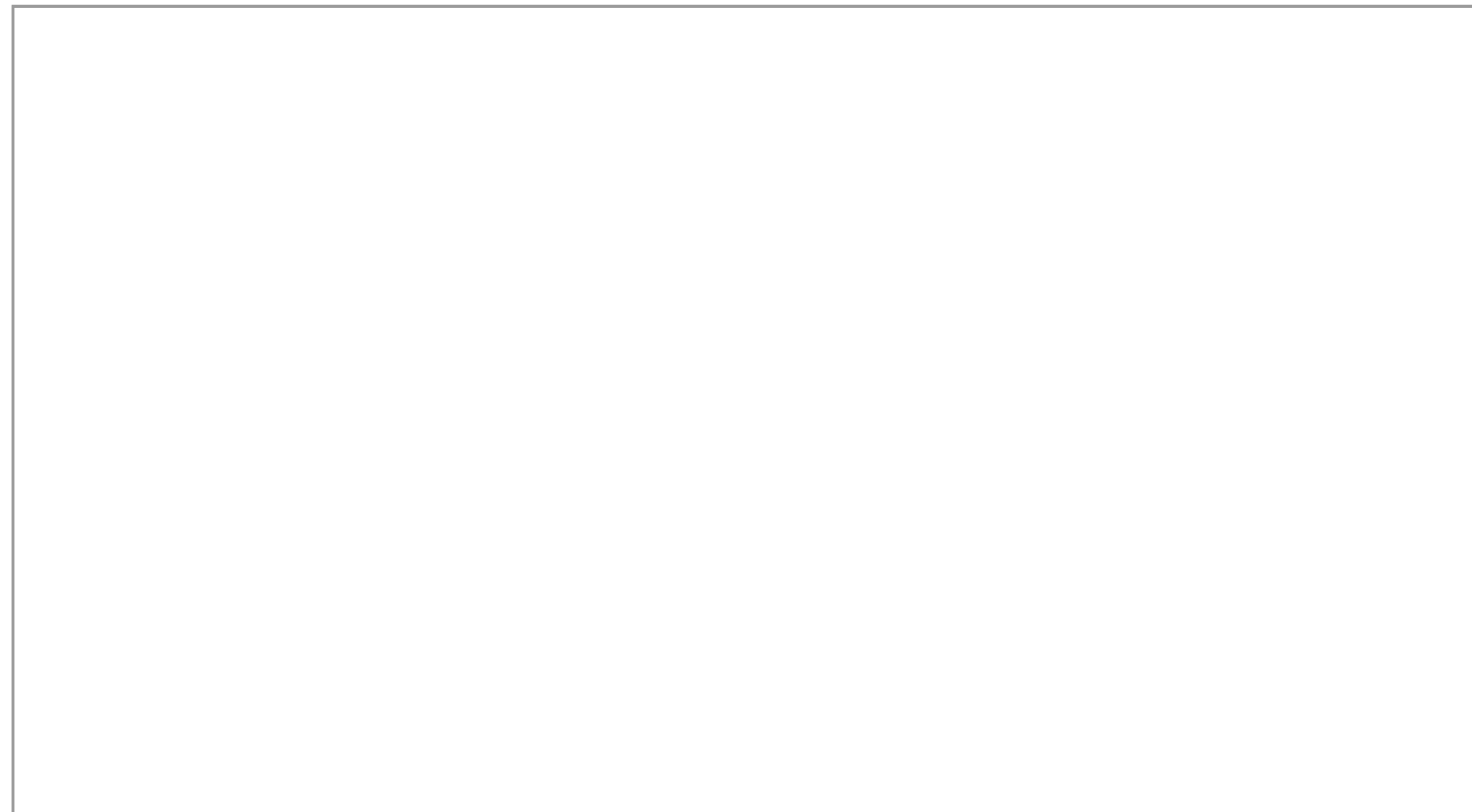
The objection note, dated June 22, said that the forest department needs to rethink its approach in 2022-23's plan for operation (APO) related to CAMPA funds.

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It cited reports by the Forest Survey of India (FSI) to observe that Haryana's green cover, which is just 3.9% of the state's total area, has seen little to no change in the past 20 years. It was 1,604sqkm in 2005 and 1,603sqkm in 2021, the note – a copy of which has been seen by TOI – said.



Moreover, the proposal to increase forest cover largely focuses on costlier plantation drives than assisted natural regeneration (ANG), which is better suited to a state that is home to the Aravalis, the panel member said in the note. In ANG, existing forest areas and ecosystems are utilised and restored to improve green cover.

“There is no net increase in forest cover over the last two decades despite all the investments made in forest plantations. It

seems there is an issue with survival of plantations and the Forest Department may want to take a pause and review its modus operandi before infusing large scale funds in business-as-usual planting,” said Ashok Khemka, additional chief secretary (science and technology) and member of the Steering Committee of State Authority.

When asked about the objection, CAMPA chairman Vivek Saxena said on Thursday it was “not correct” to say that green cover had not increased over the years. “We need to understand that Haryana has very limited forest areas and that’s why we plant seeds outside of forest cover. Also, there has been large-scale diversion of forest areas in the last 15 years,” he told TOI.

According to the CAMPA proposal, the state has approved expenditure of Rs 282 crore for new plantations in 2022-23. As of April 1, CAMPA has a stock of around Rs 1,049 crore accumulated since the early 2000s.

The panel member noted: “The proposed rate of utilisation will lead to its exhaustion in 3-4 years itself. CAMPA funds should not be treated as windfall gains, but their use should be staggered over the next 15 years at a rate of approximately Rs 80 crore per year.” In the note, the assistant chief secretary also suggested some measures to remedy the issue. Among them was monitoring the success of plantation drives years after the saplings were sown. “Effective geo-tagging (of areas where plantation drives were carried out) was not done,” Khemka said.

On these observations, the CAMPA chairman listed the steps taken by the state till now.

“We had carried out a survey with the help of TERI last year. The preliminary report said that the survival rate of saplings planted during the afforestation drives was not very poor in Haryana. Also, the state has earmarked 600 hectares for ANR. We can also increase it in the coming months if needed...” Saxena said.

On Thursday, activists said there was merit in the objections raised by the committee member.

“ANR combined with local protection costs less than half of what plantation models do Unfortunately, the forest department is busy promoting high-cost plantation models,” said Lt Col. (retd) Sarvadaman Oberoi, a Gurugram-based environmentalist.