



MoEFCC asks state for correct timber availability report

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Nagpur: The MoEFCC has asked the state government to review the decision taken by the state-level committee (SLC) to 'hurriedly' approve the timber availability report in Maharashtra submitted by the Institute of Wood Science & Technology (IWST), Bengaluru.

The 19th SLC meeting held on January 21, 2021, had approved the IWST report submitted last year. According to MoEFCC, the report was flawed and erroneous and on February 2, 2021, the environment ministry's integrated office here had raised a note of dissent in this regard.

The report basically was a bid to cover up 50 additional horizontal bands saw (AHBS) licences issued illegally by the SLC led by ex-PCCF UK Agrawal on July 23, 2018. This decision has already been scrapped by the MoEFCC on October 30, 2020, and the state government too.

"The IWST report speaks about consumption patterns and not about timber availability as told by the apex court. If you want to issue new sawmill licences you need to assess timber availability in the entire state but no assessment was done," the MoEFCC dissent note said.

"Only existing sawmills were randomly chosen and extrapolation was done about consumption. It was supposed to be examined by an internal committee of top officials which was not done. The report is completely flawed. We are not happy," the MoEFCC added.

On May 28, 2021, MoEFCC AIG CB Tashildar has written to the state to once look into the issue for the correct assessment of the timber availability for Maharashtra based on which the entire sector of wood-based industries will be regulated in the future.

"It is not understood as to why the SLC was in a great hurry to approve the report. On October 30, 2020, while deciding an application filed by an environment lawyer Manish Jeswani, the MoEFCC had directed to thoroughly scrutinize the report by an internal committee which was not done," the MoEFCC pointed to the state.

The MoEFCC also drew the attention to NGT order of February 13, 2020, which struck down the assessment of timber availability report in UP for its wrong estimation of timber availability.

As per the Supreme Court orders, additional sawmill licenses are issued by the SLC based on the timber availability report. The SLC on June 15, 2017, had requested the IWST to prepare a timber availability report. However, even before the report was prepared, the SLC led by Agrawal had issued 50 AHBS licences.

According to then PCCF (production & management), information from 52% of sawmills only was collected and extrapolated. The data collected from the forest depots, sawmills, furniture shops, check posts, inter-states imports have the inherent possibility of their duplication. The forest officials from where data was collected were not aware of the findings of the aforesaid report.

MoEFCC PICKS UP HOLES

* The MoEFCC said the methodology used to determine the availability of timber for wood-based industries in the future has not been discussed in detail

* Since the majority of the source for timber is trees outside forests (TOF), what methodology was followed to ascertain the timber from TOF is unknown. Survey of sawmills to ascertain the same is not proper

* Definition of TOF has been misunderstood while drafting the report. TOF has been discussed to be 'malki' which is improper. Forest Survey of India (FSI) has not been consulted

* The SLC has failed to initiate departmental inquiry and contempt proceedings against ex-PCCF Agrawal even after 8 months

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