

Need to save forests and achieve balance growth, says Madhya Pradesh CM

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While there is a need to protect some forest areas and biodiversity reserves, all development projects cannot be scrapped to save them, Madhya Pradesh chief minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan said on Thursday, referring to the contentious Ken-Betwa river linking project.

"We need a balance between environment and development. It also doesn't mean we can stop all development projects. If a dam has to come up and a forest area is being submerged, we cannot decide to not take up that dam project at all. For example, there is a decision to join Ken and Betwa rivers because of which, I am sure the image of the entire Bundelkhand region will transform but the forest area will also be submerged. So, depending on the extent of forest area that will be submerged, at least twice as large an area will be revived with biodiversity rich plantations," Chouhan said on the closing day of the two-day HT Environment Conclave.

"Prakriti ka soshan mat karo, dohan karo (harness natural resources, don't exploit them). Which is why we are trying to achieve a balance through plantations," he added.

On December 8 last year, the Union Cabinet led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi approved the interlinking of the Ken river in Madhya Pradesh to the Betwa river in Uttar Pradesh to irrigate the drought-prone region of Bundelkhand, spread across the two states. The project is expected to provide irrigation benefits to 9.08 lakh hectares of agricultural land, drinking water to 62 lakh people and, 103 MW of hydro and 27 MW of solar power, finance minister Nirmala Sitharaman had said during her Budget speech on February 1.

The total cost of the project has been assessed at ₹44,605 crore and will be completed in eight years. The plan was first mooted during the tenure of former prime minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee.

Environmentalists, however, believe that the project will lead to the submergence of a major portion of the core area of Panna Tiger Reserve, which is home to more than 52 tigers and endangered vulture species like the white-rumped vulture. Several committees, including a Supreme Court-appointed panel, have also raised doubts about the project.

Besides the river project, Chouhan also spoke on increasing cases of extreme rainfall in central India.

"Not only in Madhya Pradesh, globally we are facing a severe threat from the climate crisis... in Sheopur and Shivpur, we saw extreme rainfall last year. We never imagined such heavy rains would cause immediate flooding," he said.

To address the crisis, the state is focusing on increasing plantations and keeping the forest cover intact, the chief minister said. "We are trying to protect our forest cover and increase it. The green area in Madhya Pradesh has increased as per the latest Forest Survey of India analysis. We are also focusing on plantations so that it takes the scale of a public movement," he said.

"In Madhya Pradesh, we are trying to plant eight crore saplings with the people's help. One person should plant at least one tree per year in the state. For over a year, I have been planting at least one sapling a day. We also have a scheme called Ankur where people can celebrate their special day like birthdays, anniversaries, etc by planting a sapling. In six months, we have planted six lakh saplings through this scheme," he added.

The chief minister, however, pointed out that the state saw record production of paddy and wheat during the period of extreme rainfall. "In wheat we are number one now, ahead of Punjab. Under

the Pradhan Mantri Fasal Bima Yojana scheme, we have distributed ₹7,618 crore for crop failure and losses. When there is loss, we try to compensate for infrastructure and crop failure,” he said. Renewable energy farms are coming up in Agar, Shajapur, Morena, Chhatarpur, Chouhan said. “On Omkareshwar dam, we are installing solar panels which will prevent the water from evaporating and help generate 550 MW of solar power,” he said, adding that the third focus area of the state is to promote sustainable and natural agriculture.

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