

Oil palm push in the northeast may impact biodiversity, water table, say experts

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MoEFCC officials said increasing area under oil palm cultivation would contribute to a rise in forest cover but it has worried agriculture and environmental experts. (Representational Image)

The Union Ministry of Commerce and Industry has informed Parliament on September 21 that the area under oil palm cultivation has increased from 3 lakh hectares (ha) in 2015-16 to 3.57 lakh ha in 2019-20 and edible oil production has also gone up from 8.63 million tonnes in 2015-16 to 10.53 million tonnes in 2019-20.

The Centre is trying to increase the cultivation of oil seeds and oil palm that would augment the edible oil production in the country and also benefit the farming community, the reply stated.

The government's initiative is part of the National Food Security Mission (NFSM).

The increase in the area under palm oil cultivation has worried agriculture and environmental experts. The concern comes following the plans of the Union Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change (MoEFCC) to make an expansion of oil palm forestry easier in line with its upcoming policy.

MoEFCC officials said increasing area under oil palm cultivation would contribute to a rise in forest cover. The definition of forest considered by the Forest Survey of India (FSI) is all lands having trees more than one ha in an area with tree canopy density of more than 10% irrespective of ownership, legal status of land and species composition of trees, including orchards, palms etc.

"The forest policy has been finalised. Our focus is trees outside forests because it will help us achieve our nationally determined contribution (NDC) under the 2016 Paris Agreement, which is within the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), dealing with greenhouse-gas-emissions

mitigation, adaptation, and finance. Besides oil palm plantations, other agro-forestry projects, avenue plantations, community forests etc will be promoted in line with the new policy. The policy is awaiting the Union Cabinet's nod," said an MOEFCC official on condition of anonymity.

One of the country's NDCs is to create three billion tonnes of carbon dioxide (CO₂) by increasing forest and tree cover by 2030.

"Monoculture of any kind is damaging for biodiversity. Moreover, oil palm is an extremely water-intensive crop, which will impact groundwater availability. The north-east is a biodiversity rich area, which is still largely intact. Why are we planting oil palm in the north-east? We should be careful even when we are bringing large areas under oil palm cultivation in the plains. Intercropping should be considered, instead of monoculture," said GV Ramanjaneyulu, executive director, Centre for Sustainable Agriculture, Telangana.

"The land ceiling law doesn't apply to plantations. As a result, getting more area under oil palm cultivation is easier. This will lead to a change of land use and ownership. Oil palm is high yielding, but it has a range of concerns as well," he added.

The government has also placed import of refined palm oil in the "restricted" category from January 8, which is likely to boost the consumption of domestically produced edible oil.

In reply to a question in the Lok Sabha last year, the Union Ministry of Agriculture and Farmers' Welfare had said its emphasis was on the north-eastern states to increase their area under the oil palm cultivation.

The funding pattern of the Centre's oil palm scheme, which was 50:50% share with state government in 2014-15, has been revised to 90:10% share in case of the north-eastern states from 2015-16.

Around 37,176 ha have been covered under oil palm cultivation in Mizoram, Assam, Nagaland, Tripura and Arunachal Pradesh, according to the reply last year.

Andhra Pradesh (AP) has the highest area under oil palm cultivation in the country at 1,73,349 ha.

Mizoram, which has the largest area under oil palm cultivation in the north-east, is facing environmental and socio-economic impacts of these plantations.

"Large scale oil palm plantations not only impact biodiversity and wildlife but also land rights, food security, water table and social structure of the community. We have studied how oil palm impacts biodiversity, particularly forest birds. Oil palm plantations had the lowest forest bird species richness, as compared to both teak plantations and jhum cultivation. Oil palm plantations replace diverse forest growth in many places. This is mainly because of the lack of zones in the oil palm policy. Oil palms are grown on the edge of the Dampa Tiger Reserve, along streams, and have even replaced rice fields in many valleys," said TR Shankar Raman, a scientist at Nature Conservation Foundation, a non-governmental wildlife conservation and research organisation based in Mysuru, Karnataka.

"Oil palm is an extremely water-dependent crop. In Mizoram, water is being diverted from streams to oil palm plantations, which is likely to impact the water table and local residents, who are dependent on various water sources. It may also impact food security because oil palm is replacing cultivation plots where around 25 different varieties of crops such as rice, tubers, vegetables, and bamboo shoots are grown. In Mizoram, the land, where oil palm is cultivated in each district, is apportioned to particular companies as if they were captive districts. Change in land ownership from community lands to private ownership is a cause for concern," he added.

According to a paper by TR Shankar Raman and Jaydev Mandal, which was published in May 2016, oil palm plantations had the lowest forest bird species richness (10 species), followed by teak plantations (38). While jhum (50) plantation had lower species richness than the rainforest (58).

Forest bird abundance in the jhum landscape was similar to that in a rainforest, on average 304% higher than in oil palm plantations, the study found.

Purabi Bose, deputy coordinator on gender at International Union of Forest Research Organisations, a non-profit, non-governmental international network of forest scientists, headquartered in Vienna, Austria, wrote in her paper in Elsevier's Land Use Policy journal, published in February 2019, that an increase in oil palm plantation has impacted gender roles in Mizoram, where women's roles became "submissive", as compared to their contribution in jhum cultivation.

Women's land-use decision-making roles have been curbed and land use change from shifting cultivation to oil palm has impacted customary land management practices, she had cited in her paper.

Source: <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/oil-palm-push-in-the-northeast-may-impact-biodiversity-water-table-say-experts/story-8QwpafRXqK0mgIfHeL7HDK.html>