

Only 38% of 4 lakh saplings planted to compensate for tree felling in Delhi, shows forest dept records

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The Delhi forest department has records that account for only around 38% of more than 4 lakh saplings that were to be planted as part of compensatory afforestation to be done in lieu of felling of trees in the national capital in the past three years, according to an affidavit submitted by the department in the Delhi High Court earlier this year.

Altogether, in the four forest divisions, a total of 4,09,046 saplings were to be planted as part of compensatory afforestation and only 1,58,522 were planted, as per forest department records.

Of around 52,080 saplings that were to be planted in the North forest division as compensatory afforestation by user agencies that sought permission to fell trees, records were available only for around 5,525 or 10% of the mandated number for the past three years – 2019-20, 2020-21, and 2021-22.

Even plantations that were to have been done in 2019-20 and 2020-21 were pending. In the North division, of the 10,430 saplings to be planted in 2020-21, only 3,059 were planted.

In the West division, 2,68,346 saplings were to have been planted in the past three years, of which 1,27,107 were planted, going by the affidavit. In the Central division, 1,940 (around 4%) out of 45,260 saplings were planted, while the figure was 23,950 out of 43,360 saplings in the South.

Forest department officials pointed out that there may be issues with the data itself. "In many cases, user agencies don't supply the data. We have asked many times. We have written to user agencies, and in many cases, we haven't got a response... whether they have done (plantation), or whether it has failed due to negligence. In most cases, the problem is that we haven't got data from the agencies concerned. Also, on field visits, we may have got only these details," a senior forest department official said.

Another senior official said, "User agencies either do the plantation themselves or do it through the DDA (Delhi Development Authority). So, it is a problem of the user agency not doing plantation in most cases. Or, they have given the money to the DDA, and they have not done it. In some cases, they have changed the location (of plantation) and they have not intimated the department, or plantation may have failed. There could be a variety of reasons why the plantations were not there."

According to the affidavit, the DDA, which is carrying out plantation on behalf of the National Highways Authority of India (NHAI) in the West division, was granted permission for felling in 2019 and 2020. Of the 1,54,040 saplings to be planted, 91,000 were done. "Plantation not yet completed. Despite several reminders, no monthly report was submitted by the user agency," the forest department noted in its affidavit. In another instance of the DDA undertaking plantation on behalf of the National Buildings Construction Corporation (NBCC) for a project that was granted permission in 2020, 6,000 out of the mandated 9,490 saplings were planted so far, with the user agency not having submitted a completion report yet, according to the affidavit.

A DDA official said, "There are multiple projects of the NHAI with different plantation mandates, and different projects for the NBCC. Records will have to be checked about which ones were completed. We record the plantations that are done. We submit the data to the user agency. The forest department also asks us for data, and visits the site. We also submit before and after data, with geo-coordinates of the site to the agency and the forest department.

Our plantation happens in the monsoon season. If the approval comes after the monsoon or the payment was made to us after the season, then the plantation will only happen in the next season."

For a few other projects, the "stipulated time period of nine months" for completion of plantation was not yet over.

In the North division, 9,100 trees were to have been planted by the Delhi Jal Board for tree felling meant for the upgradation of the Rithala wastewater treatment plant. Permissions were granted in February 2021, and only 2,776 saplings were planted as per forest department records. A DJB spokesperson said that 3,700 trees have been planted and the rest will be planted in a month's time.

Source: <https://indianexpress.com/article/cities/delhi/delhi-tree-felling-saplings-planted-for-compensation-8121947/>