

## Outbreak set to stall tree plantation in Maharashtra

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The austerity measures announced by the Maharashtra government owing to Covid-19 is likely to stall the annual tree plantation drive carried out in monsoon by the state forest department.

The forest department as well as other agencies undertake tree plantation drives between June and August every year. However, as per department officials in Pune Circle, the office has not received any funds to go ahead with the planned plantation drive although nurseries are filled with saplings, owing to the austerity drive under which 67 per cent planned government expenditure has been cut.

“We haven’t received any funds from either state or district plan. We generally get the funds by May. This year, considering the ongoing situation, the chances are slim that we will get funds and the drive will go ahead,” said Vivek Khandekar, Chief Conservator of Forests, Pune.

Between 2016 and 2019, the state forest department under the BJP government had launched ‘Green Maharashtra’ drive with an aim to plant 50 crore trees across the state in the four-year period. In October 2019, the government had claimed it had surpassed the target by planting 33 crore trees in July-September 2019. The Indian Express had found that non-forest agencies — such as gram panchayats — which were tasked with planting trees had not uploaded the mandatory audio-visual proof of the tree plantation drives on the specially created portal.

In Pune Revenue Division, it was claimed the gram panchayats planted 1.7 crore saplings; however, no evidence was uploaded for 87 per cent (1.49 crore) saplings. Also, out of the 59 government agencies involved in the drive as many as 38 had not submitted survival reports about the saplings.

This year, the targets set by the forest department were comparatively modest. For example, Pune Circle — which comprises three divisions in Pune and Solapur district — had planned to plant 17 lakh saplings on forest land. However, it may not meet the target due to unavailability of funds. Last year Pune Circle planted 70 lakh saplings on forest land.

In Pune Division — which comprises six talukas namely Maval, Mulshi, Daund, Indapur, Baramati and Havveli — preparations were done for plantation of about 4 lakh trees with special emphasis on teakwood.

“Our plan and preparation is for plantation of 3.25 lakh teakwood stumps — mainly on Jal Yukta Shivar sites in Maval and Mulshi areas,” said A Sree Laxmi, Deputy Conservator of Forests.

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