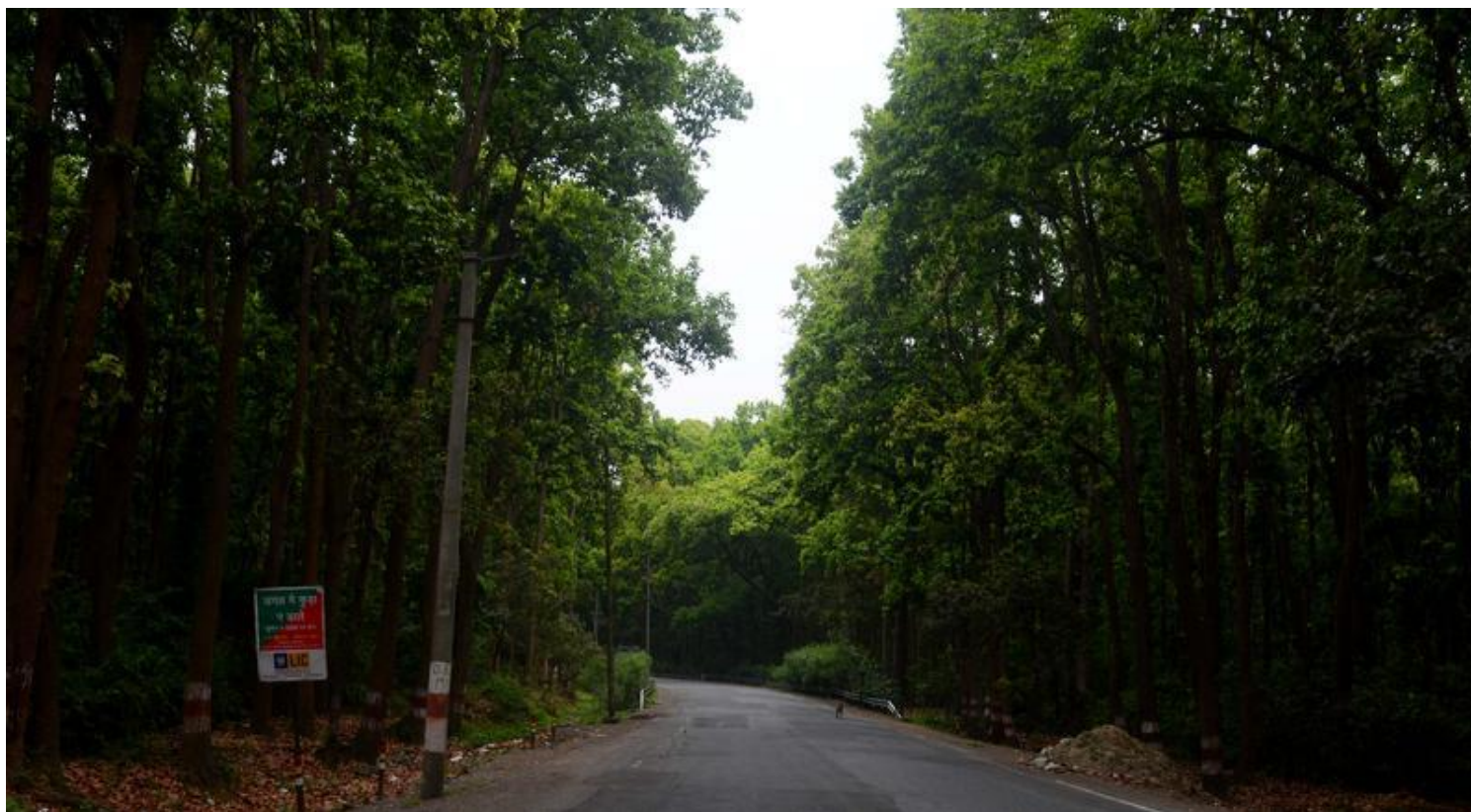


Over 2.5k trees including British-era Sal forest to be cut for proposed expressway that will reduce travel time between Delhi & Doon

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Dehradun: The Delhi-Dehradun expressway, which promises to cut travel time between the national capital and Dehradun to barely 2.5 hours, will come at a cost of felling over 2,500 trees in Uttarakhand, most of which are Sal trees, over a century old. This proposed deforestation which is to take place in a roughly 4-km stretch, comprising the tail end of the highway that will fall

under the Dehradun forest division, will cause irreparable damage to the Shivalik range, causing its slopes to become unstable, warn experts.

Sources said that many as 33 tree species are to be chopped down in this stretch. Of the 2,572 trees that are slated for felling, 1,622 (60% of the lot) are the 'Doon Sal' trees, according to details exclusively accessed by TOI. Experts say the British-era trees, some of them 100 to 120 years old, would be nearly impossible to regrow and regenerate as they have "reached their climax".

"It is not recommended to fell trees that are part of climax species. Sal forests play a vital role in holding slippery hills of the Shivalik range and are a perfect habitat for wildlife species like leopards, tigers and elephants. These trees date back to the British era and need to be preserved," said VK Dhawan, former senior scientist of the Doon-based Forest Research Institute (FRI).

The other tree species that will be axed for the highway include cheer, saagon, gulmohar as well as fruit-bearing trees like blackberry, peepal and mango.

Apart from the 2,572 trees that are listed, several smaller trees are also going to be chopped. Sources said that these trees aren't even counted as their diameters are less than 10 cm and girth not more than 31.4. Such trees are tagged "pole crop" and "not counted when marking of a tree is done for felling", said a source.

The elevated expressway, which will cut the distance between Delhi and Dehradun from 272 km to 180 km, will cost around Rs 10,000 crore. The expressway will start from Akshardham in Delhi and culminate at Asharodi check post in Dehradun, connecting Delhi, Uttar Pradesh and Uttarakhand.

Environmentalist Ravi Chopra, who is spearheading a Supreme Court-appointed Committee on the All-Weather Char Dham road project, said, "The slopes of the Shivalik ranges are extremely prone to erosion and therefore need a green cover to remain stable. Cutting the trees here and planting them "elsewhere" will not save these slopes. The instability of the slopes will become a critical issue."

The divisional forest officer (DFO) of Dehradun, Rajiv Dhiman, when queried about the matter, said, “A team has explored all the different options to ensure minimum loss to the trees and wildlife. The project is being implemented in tandem with the guidelines set by our ministry and only after all due clearances will the next move be taken.”

For the Char Dham road project alone, Uttarakhand has lost over 28,000 trees and is set to lose more. Experts say that the small Himalayan state has witnessed extensive fragmentation of wildlife due to deforestation of late. Scientists warn of devastating repercussions if the rampant tree felling continues.