

## Rising temperatures add to spike in forest fires in state

16 March 2022

From the beginning of March, at least 1,000 instances of fires have been reported across Karnataka forests, shows the data by Forest Survey of India.

The summer and the heat also add to the blaze resulting in huge loss of the already eroding green cover in the southern state. While the occurrence of fires in this season is considered "routine", the number of blazes are adding to the threat of wiping out more forest land in the state.

"It (fires) happens every year. This is the season for fire because during this time (post-monsoon and post-winter), temperatures start rising," Jawaid Akthar, additional chief secretary, forest, ecology and environment said. To be sure, the number of fires was determined by adding up the total number of fires as updated by the Forest Survey of India.

According to experts, the forest department carries out fire lines exercise, which refers to cleaning up of around 30 meters of area around potential fire zones by clearing shrubs, bushes and other dead wood that can easily catch fire in dense areas. Experts and the forest department said that pile is also set on controlled fire, which could also be picked up as a fire incident.

Karnataka has lost around 65 square kilometres of moderately dense forests in two years, according to the 2021 India State of Forests Report (ISFR), released in January. The report attributes the decrease in moderately dense forest to activities like shifting cultivation, felling of trees, natural calamities, anthropogenic (human) pressure and other factors.

As per the report, forest cover accounts for 20.2% of the total land area in Karnataka which is lower than the national average of 21.7% and way less the globally prescribed norm of around 33%. Karnataka has a total forest cover of 38,770 sq km compared to 38,575, as found in the previous survey. India's forest cover is 7.13 lakh square km.

While the Karnataka government claims that forest cover in the state has grown, this claim has been questioned in the past. According to the forest survey, very dense forest cover increased by 32 sq km to 4,533 square km while open forest jumped by 1,896 square km to 13,212 square km.

"We align, create and maintain forest lines. There are systems which have early information shared by multiple sources and these fire prevention or containment exercises account for human made fires as well. The watch towers inside the forests, called anti-poaching camps are also used to detect fires," Akthar said.

Meanwhile, the Indian Meteorological Department's Monday weather predictions read: "Heat wave to severe heat wave conditions in some parts of Saurashtra-Kutch and Konkan and heat wave conditions over Coastal Karnataka, Southwest Rajasthan and Gujarat region."

It added that south interior Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, Puducherry and Karaikal and Kerala and Mahe are likely to receive light rain from March 16 to 18, which could bring in much needed relief.

Karnataka also has large tracts of its area which houses the Western Ghats that span across at least six states and spreads in an area of over 1.4 lakh square km, of which around 20,600 km falls within the state.

The Basavaraj Bommai-led Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government in Karnataka has followed its predecessors as on, December 4, by refusing to go ahead with the Kasturirangan committee report which proposes that around 37% of the roughly 60,000 square km area be declared as eco-sensitive area (ESA).

Experts indicate that it would be more prudent to conserve fragile ecosystems which costs less than the calamities.

"Considering the changes in climate (evident from recurring floods, droughts, landslides, increasing temperature, etc), which would affect the livelihood of all the people (irrespective of poor or rich)

and hurt the nation's economy. It would be prudent to conserve the fragile ecosystems by spending money on the resources for restoration / rejuvenation, which costs less compared to the situation prone to calamities," Dr TV Ramachandra, from the Centre for Ecological Sciences in the Indian Institute of Science had shared earlier.

All the other states had earlier rejected the professor Madhav Gadgil report, calling it "anti-agrarian", necessitating the setting up of another committee under Dr Kasturirangan, which experts said, was a 'diluted' version that tried to find a balance in saving livelihoods as well as the rapidly denigrating ecology.

Wildlife activist Joseph Hoover said that some of these fire lines could also be have been picked up as fires as the department starts this exercise in December and goes on till early weeks of March as well.

This year alone, Karnataka has suffered rain-related losses to the tune of ₹11916.30 crore in October and November, indicating the real impacts of climate change.

There were 282 incidents of landslides in 2020 in this region as against 161 in 2019, registering a 75% increase in landslides in Karnataka due to deforestation, unscientific road works in the southern state alone between 2019 and 2020, according to government data, the Hindustan Times had reported on April 8.

Source: <https://www.hindustantimes.com/cities/bengaluru-news/rising-temperatures-add-to-spike-in-forest-fires-in-state-101647284006776.html>