

Save Thano: Locals oppose proposal to axe 10,000 trees for expansion of Dehradun airport

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Locals during the protest on Sunday (Picture Courtesy: Twitter @HardeepBhuria)

Hundreds gathered outside the Dehradun Airport on Sunday to demonstrate against the proposed felling of more than 10,000 trees. Seen holding placards that read 'Save Thano', the demonstrators were also seen hugging the trees.

The demonstration was triggered by Uttarakhand government's decision to seek the National Wildlife Board's approval for transfer of 243 acres of forest land to the Airport Authority of India (AAI). If granted, over 10,000 trees could be axed in the Thano range for expansion of Dehradun's Jolly Grant Airport.

While defending its request for the expansion, the state government cited Dehradun airport's proximity to the Line of Actual Control (LAC). Uttarakhand shares a border with China, imparting strategic importance to the Jolly Grant Airport, the Uttarakhand government said.

In June of this year, the Uttarakhand State Wildlife Advisory Board approved the transfer of 73 hectares of forest land within the protected Gangotri National Park. This area will be utilised for the construction of three strategically important roads that will ease the movement of Indo-Tibetan Border Police (ITBP) to the India-China border.

At present, the runway at Dehradun's Jolly Grant Airport is 2,140 m long. Apart from a new terminal that is likely to be completed by October 2021, the AAI has proposed that the length of the runway be extended to 2,765 m.

The upgradation which is being done within a budget of Rs 353 crore is expected to increase the Dehradun airport's capacity by eight-fold.

Since the area falling under the proposed expansion falls within a 10 km radius of the Rajaji National Park Eco-Sensitive Zone, the Uttarakhand government has sought the approval of the National Wildlife Board in this regard.

However, environmentalists and local activists say the axing of more than 10,000 trees in the Thano range could not only affect notified elephant corridors but also the region's eco-diversity.

One demonstrator claimed that Uttarakhand has airstrips at Gauchar and Pithoragarh close to the LAC. The proposed expansion of the Dehradun airport will only cater to commercial aircraft, the demonstrator added.

Director of Jolly Grant Airport, DK Gautam told news agency ANI that the Uttarakhand government will denotify forest reserve according to the norms put in place by the Environment Ministry. "As far as trees are concerned, there would be plantation at some other place," DK Gautam said.

Source: <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/locals-oppose-proposal-to-axe-over-10-000-trees-for-expansion-of-dehradun-airport-1732904-2020-10-19>