

Setback to forest dept as NGO challenges timber availability report

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Nagpur: In a setback to the state forest department keen to issue additional horizontal band saw (AHBS) licenses, city-based wildlife and forest protection NGO, Save Ecosystem And Tiger (SEAT), has challenged the timber availability report prepared by the Institute of Wood Science and Technology (IWST), Bengaluru. The petition has been submitted before the regional office of the MoEFCC. As per apex court orders, AHBS licenses are issued by the state-level committee (SLC) based on the timber availability report. The SLC had on June 15, 2017, requested IWST to prepare a timber availability report. However, even before the report came in, SLC led by ex-PCCF UK Agrawal on July 23, 2018, issued 50 AHBS licenses.

The report was submitted to the state government in 2020. However, it has been challenged by SEAT director Tejas Parshivnikar through his lawyer Manish Jeswani on the grounds that IWST has no mandate to prepare timber availability report (TAR) for Maharashtra.

Parshivnikar has submitted that no transparent procedure or request for proposal (RFP) was invited for preparing the technical and key document like TAR, and no inputs of whatsoever nature were taken from premier forestry institutions like Forest Research Institute of India (FRII), and Forest Survey of India (FSI), Dehradun.

The petition states that the IWST report is against various apex court decisions and directions issued to SLCs regarding assessment of legal availability of timber. The TAR is unscientific, mechanical, and based upon extrapolation of numbers and figures, which is not permissible, it says.

The petitioner alleged that the report is prepared only with a view to give undue advantage to sawmills, veneer, and wood-based industries by intentionally ignoring SC directions.

Technically speaking, the study of the availability of timber should have been carried out by laying sample plots in the source areas. But the IWST report links the availability of wood in the forest depots and instead of working plans, data from depots was collected.

The report itself admits that the working plans for all divisions were not available for the study. If the working plans were not available, the study should have been carried out by laying sample plots. The report is erroneous as half of standing timber in forests is not accounted for. Besides, the petitioner alleged that the report does not give species-wise and agro-climatic zone-wise availability of timber. The forest depots can never be viewed as a 'source' of timber as understood in the guidelines. The data submitted by sawmills was taken at face value and there was no methodology adopted for checking the validity of the submitted data.

The biennial 'Status of Forest Report' published by the FSI has authentic state-wise data, which was also not used. Hence, the scientific basis of the report is highly questionable, if not false. Assessment of timber from trees outside forest (TOF) has been worked out by surveying the sawmills, which is wrong as chances of proper segregation of timber from the source are remote.

The IWST report clearly admits that the data from sawmills gives an idea of the total consumption of timber. Therefore, the survey of sawmills gives the consumption pattern, and not the availability of timber. The report is statistically deficient, says the petition.

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