

Wildfire Incidents on Rise in North Kumaon as Summer Knocks

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ALMORA: Scanty rainfall and soaring mercury are taking toll on the forests of north Kumaon, as at least 18 incidents of wildfire came to the fore from the region since the onset of February. The inferno has affected 45.85 hectares of forest land in the region till April 12. The period between February and June is considered to be the "fire season" and blazes of winter are not counted. Many forest fire incidents also go unreported.

UNCONTROLLED BLAZE



Year	Number of forest fires reported in North Kumaon	Affected area (hectares)
2010	245	587.45
2011	45	77.90
2012	162	335.05
2013	30	60.25
2014	98	222.60
2015	50	97.35
2016	18 (till April 12)	45.85

In the last week, reports of fire incidents came from all the divisions of north Kumaon especially Pithoragarh, Almora and Champawat.

The experts blame it on the climate change. They say that due to climatic variations and decreased snowfall the incidents of forest fire are on the rise. GCS Negi, professor of GB Pant Institute of Himalayan Environment and Development said, "Earlier there was a lot of attachment with forests and villagers were depended on forests for their daily needs including fuel and fodder. Now, the dependency has decreased and

attachment is also less. Moreover, in some cases, government took their lands and made sanctuaries and does not allow them to cut trees without permission for fuel or fodder." Ecological implications of the forest fires are many, said Negi.

"Although there are a couple of positive sides of controlled forest fire like increased fertility and destruction of obnoxious weeds. In the event of large fire, we lose biodiversity," he said. About 11% of the state's 8,000 sq km of pine forest catches fire within every 2-5 year cycle, he said.

After analyzing the forest fire incidents in north Kumaon circle during the last six years, it was found that the year 2010 was the most damaging for the environment. As many as 245 fire incidents took place in the forests of the north Kumaon hills affecting 587.45 hectares. However, 2013 was the least damaging as only 30 cases of fire were reported and 60.25 hectares of forest was damaged. The year 2012 too remained quite detrimental with 335 hectares of forests damaged in 162 fire incidents.

Prem Kumar, the forest conservator of north Kumaon, told TOI that it was not possible to keep an eye on the entire region and the villagers should take the initiative if there is any fire.

"It's not possible to employ a fire watcher at every village. There's gram pradhan, there's mahila mangal dal, there's fire protection committee. Forest doesn't only belong to the forest department. Forest belongs to each of them. Of course, the department always stands beside the community. But the community should take the initiative if there's any forest fire near their village." In each division, Kumar said, there are at least 150 people who are dedicated to extinguishing forest fire. However, the villagers are not happy with the forest department. They complain that the department took away the rights of their lands and does not let them cut trees for use of fuel, so the responsibility of extinguishing fires lies with the department.