

Draft Forest Policy Sets Up Battle over Forest Rights Act

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The government has made public its draft National Forest Policy, to replace the one crafted in 1988. Incorporating consequences of climate change but entirely ignoring one of the three forest related laws, the Forest Rights Act, the policy brings new focus to plantations, growing trees outside forest lands and wood industry.

The policy continues with the national goal of a minimum of one-third of the geographical area under forest or tree cover. But it does away with the goal for hill and mountainous regions to maintain two-thirds of the geographical area under forest cover.

Promising to set up a parallel arrangement to the Forest Rights Act, the policy proposes to launch a new Community Forest Management Mission, bringing government, community and private land under the new proposed management system.

Drafted by the Indian Institute of Forest Management, the research arm of the environment ministry, the policy moots that special communities at the gram sabha (village council) level be created to take over management of forests. The plans prepared by the gram sabhas for their forestlands would also have to be vetted by the forest department based on rules prepared for the same, such as wider management plans the forest department prepares.

The policy released for public comments on June 16 for only 15 days ignores that the Forest Rights Act was promulgated in 2006 to take back control from the forest department of traditional forest lands and give these to tribals and other forest-dwellers. The Act gave communities complete management control over their lands with the forest department's role substantially diminished.

The forest departments had previously, too, run participatory forest management systems but with the final veto of the departments over the lands and the use of the resources, the demand for greater rights to tribals and forest-dwellers had picked pace and found political support during the previous National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government. This culminated in the Forest Rights Act during the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government.

Since then, a prolonged battle has been on between communities, the tribal affairs ministry, forest officials and some conservation groups for control of forest resources. The FRA gave the communities the right to protect forestland and earn from these. The policy now proposes to put in place a country-wide mechanism, picking up from what some state forest departments have already attempted. In its focus on producing supply for the wood industry through farm forestry, the policy recommends putting in place contracts between industries and farmers – ‘pre-production’ agreements to fix price and quantity. The policy says, “Large-scale expansion of agro-forestry and farm forestry should be encouraged through commensurate incentives and operational support systems such as lowering the input costs and enabling access to reasonably priced quality planting material.”

The draft policy comes at a time when the environment ministry is finalising details of investment by the private sector in forestry in government lands, a decision that successive governments have avoided since the 80s.

Such proposals were killed earlier due to concerns the rights of the millions dependent directly or indirectly on the forestlands would be restricted. A preliminary guideline for kick-starting PPP mode investment in government forests has already been shared with the state governments.

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