

# Deforestation Govt. Mulls Felling of Trees Above 1,000 ft. Height to Clear Fire Lines

*Seema Sharma*

As wildfires rage in the forests of Uttarakhand, the government has decided to fell trees growing in the 'fire lines' above an altitude of 1,000 metres. Forest Secretary S. Ramaswamy said on Tuesday the state government is waiting for the written order in this regard from the environment ministry as trees above an altitude of 1,000m can only be felled with Supreme Court's permission due to a ban imposed in 1980.

Fire lines or firebreaks are wide clearings made in a forest to stop the spread of fire. They range in width from 20m to 300m. Neglected by the forest department over the past four years, Uttarakhand's 4,500 overgrown fire lines have repeatedly proved to be a hazard.

Ramaswamy said a Rs. eight-crore fund has been released from the CAMPA (Compensatory Afforestation Fund Management and Planning Authority) scheme to make all arrangements for fire control and clear the fire lines. However, the fund, which should have been made available to the forest department by January, came just a week ago when large parts of the forest had been gutted.

S.K. Chandola, former principal chief conservator of forests, said, "Usually, the funds are provided quite late and are not sufficient, so the forest staff is not able to maintain the fire lines which need labour to repeatedly clear vegetation. Had those old fire lines been maintained, the extent of fire would have been much less."

Chandola added that the state government should trust the capability of people associated with its forest department, including forest guards, rangers and divisional fire officers in the field. He said the state's staff is equipped to control the fires as it knows the topography better than the external agencies.

He also stressed on the need to take along the local people and engage them in firefighting by paying money. Chandola said the locals have traditional knowledge and are passionate about forests, so their help would be of immense value in fighting forest fires.

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