

# **Man-Made Disaster: State Loses Forest Cover Worth Rs. 2,500 Crore**

Uttarakhand fire is a man-made disaster which has so far damaged forest cover worth over Rs. 2,500 crore and taken heavy toll on invaluable wildlife and medicinal herbs and plants.

Preliminary fact-finding report suggests that it all started as a routing act of villagers who generally resort to the practice of setting a fire the nearby forest area so that they can grow grass and fodder as fresh vegetation for their livestock.

But the possibly intended controlled action went out of hand due to hot weather and dry vegetation on the ground and the villagers could not douse it before it engulfed the larger area.

“However, we need to find out whether the villager could actually not control it or few of them did it deliberately in collusion with timber mafia”, said an official here amid reports of a nexus between villagers and timber or land\builders mafia in the state behind the fire.

Though the exact estimation of loss in monetary term seems difficult at this juncture, the official put this figure roughly at Rs. 2,500 crore keeping in view the damage of forest area. A team of experts has, meanwhile, reached Uttarakhand to ascertain the cause of fire and extent of damage. Four persons have already been arrested for starting fires in Pauri Garhwal. “Their role would be investigated and action would be taken accordingly,” said Environment and Forests Minister Prakash Javadekar on Monday.

Refusing to comment on extent of involvement of timber mafia behind the massive fire, the minister said the probe has been ordered and culprits will be brought to book. Not a single inch of forest land will be allowed to be encroached by anybody,” he said.

It is suspected that the builders always want forest land to be cleared so that they can go ahead with their expansion plan on encroached land. They take villagers on board and also take timber mafia along as apart of the bigger nexus. “Since it cannot happen without help of forest officials, the probe will also look into their roles, if any, in the present disaster”, said the official.

Uttarakhand’s forest have many verities of commercially viable trees like sal, oak, acacia and conifer. Sine fire can usually damage only lower portion of trees, the upper portion can easily be used. Before this latest fire incident, the state had till April 21 reported 291 forest fires.

“Government is taking the forest fires of Uttarakhand very seriously. Over 6,000 people have been deployed for fighting it. We have also granted Rs. 45 crore to the state.” Javadekar said, adding the fire has been controlled. The issue of forest fire in Uttarakhand was also raised in the Lok Sabha were members expressed their concerns. Raising the issue during Zero Hour the claimed that the fire was spreading to Himachal Pradesh and parts of the Jammu region, while 3000 hectares in the Corbett National Park has been destroyed.

Responding to members concerns, the Home Minister Rajnath Singh, however, said the government has been able to bring the fires under control. “The situation is now to tally under control after three NDRF teams were pressed into service along with the Air Force MI-17 helicopters,” he said.

While members said that eight persons have so far been killed in the forest fires, Singh said he has so far not been told of any deaths during the interaction with the state administration.

More than 6,100 personnel and three IAF choppers fitted with Bambi bucket to carry water have been deployed in Uttarakhand to extinguish multiple forest fires.

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