

# Standing Committee Report Summary

## Status of Forests in India

- The Standing Committee on Science & Technology, Environment & Forests (Chair: Mr. Anand Sharma) submitted its report on the 'Status of Forests in India' on February 12, 2019. Key observations and recommendations of the Committee include:
  - **Definition of Forest:** The Committee examined the Draft National Forest Draft Policy 2018 which was circulated for public feedback during April 2018. The Committee noted that the word 'Forest' is not defined in the Draft Policy. It noted that the Ministry uses the definition of the term as provided by the Supreme Court. The Court defined forests to include all forests statutorily recognised under the Forest (Conservation) Act, 1980. The Committee noted that certain stakeholders had expressed concerns that this definition did not include ecosystems which don't have forest-like attributes, such as wetlands or grasslands. Therefore, it recommended that Ministry of Environment, Forest & Climate Change (MoEF) come out with a comprehensive and clear definition of the term 'Forest'.
  - **Forest cover:** The Committee expressed concern about the decline in the forest cover in the North-Eastern States, which constitute 65.34% of its geographical area in comparison to the national forest cover of 21.54%. It recommended that the concerned state governments and the MoEF take all necessary steps to ensure that the decline in forest cover in these states is stopped at the earliest.
  - The Committee noted that no action plan has been prepared by the MoEF for controlling the illegal cutting of trees in forests. It stated that MoEF must take cognizance of the illegal felling of trees in different parts of the country and prepare an action plan for tackling this menace, in coordination with state governments.
  - **Deforestation:** The Committee noted that the budget allocation to National Afforestation Programme has been insufficient. This has affected the achievement of the annual targeted area of afforestation during the last few years. The Committee recommended that the MoEF ensure that adequate allocation is made to the National Afforestation Programme and the targets under the Programme are achieved. Further, the Committee noted that the funding pattern for the Programme changed in 2015-16 from a 100% centrally sponsored scheme to a 60-40 sharing scheme between the centre and state. Therefore, the Committee recommended that the concerned state governments provide their share of the changed funding pattern to ensure the success of the Programme.
- **Evaluation of afforestation:** The Committee noted that the mid-term evaluation study on National Afforestation Programme conducted by the Indian Council of Forestry Research and Education in 2008 had highlighted the successful implementation of the programme. However, the Committee stated that nearly ten years have passed since the ICFRE evaluation. Therefore, it recommended that the MoEF should undertake a study to assess the impact of National Afforestation Programme and the Green India Mission so that their actual impact on the forest cover is known and further strategies in this regard could be formulated accordingly
- The Committee observed that the MoEF has not undertaken any field survey to determine the total land available in the country for afforestation. It recommended that necessary action in this regard should be taken at the earliest so that state governments can formulate necessary strategies for taking up the afforestation activities in their respective states.
- **Concerns of exploitation:** The Committee observed that the general perception of the public is that the Draft Policy emphasizes the commercialization of forests and curtails the ownership of rights of tribals, tribal communities, and traditional forest-dwellers. Concerns were also expressed that the Draft Policy aims to take away the rights of Gram Sabhas for management of forests and instead hands it over to the proposed centrally controlled Corporations. The Committee felt that if too much emphasis is given to the private partnership model in management of forests in the Draft Policy, forest lands may be lost. It recommended that adequate safeguards be taken after stakeholder consultations to protect the forests from over-exploitation by private parties.

DISCLAIMER: This document is being furnished to you for your information. You may choose to reproduce or redistribute this report for non-commercial purposes in part or in full to any other person with due acknowledgement of PRS Legislative Research ("PRS"). The opinions expressed herein are entirely those of the author(s). PRS makes every effort to use reliable and comprehensive information, but PRS does not represent that the contents of the report are accurate or complete. PRS is an independent, not-for-profit group. This document has been prepared without regard to the objectives or opinions of those who may receive it.