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Delhi forest dept to drop 10,000 seed balls for plantation at Asola

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Delhi's forest and wildlife department said on Monday that it will experiment with "seed balls" to carry out a pilot project on August 10 at the Asola Bhatti Wildlife Sanctuary where over 10,000 such balls will be dispersed using drones and catapults, among other techniques, in order to boost the green cover in the sanctuary.

The balls – made from a mixture of soil, cowdung and neem cake – all have a seed in the centre and will be dropped in different areas of the sanctuary as part of a mega-plantation drive that starts on Saturday, under which saplings will also be planted by hand.

A total of 100,000 such seed balls are planned to be dispersed across Delhi over this year's monsoon, with the forest department to carry out a survey after six months to one year to assess the technique's success rate.

The idea, said additional principal chief conservator of forest (APCCF) Suneesh Buxy, is to assess the success of such a technique on the ground, based on which future plantation drives can be carried out in a similar manner.

"We will utilise drones and paramotors, which will fly above a terrain and drop these seeds. Catapults will be used to throw these seeds long distances as well. We also plan to test a technique called dibbling, where shallow pits are created and the seeds are dropped by hand. On Saturday, we plan to drop close to 10,000 such seeds, which will be in addition to the saplings we plant manually," said Buxy, who inspected the seed balls on Sunday alongside Delhi's principal secretary (environment and forest), the special secretary (environment) and the chief conservator of forest.

Officials said they had created seed balls for the activity as well as seed tablets, which are rectangular in shape and smaller in size. The process of creating these balls took nearly a fortnight, with germination already starting inside.

Buxy said they had mixed the seeds with a paste consisting of soil, neem cake, cow dung and trichoderma – a plant-beneficial fungi, with the mixture rolled into the shape of a ball.

“There is high humidity right now and the germination rate has also been very high. The balls were dried up and kept in the shade. Now that they are dry, they are ready for landing,” he added.

A second forest official, part of the south forest division, said such a technique can particularly be useful in planting native species in inaccessible areas, such as mining pits in the southern ridge. “This will help us in deep mining pits and undulating terrain. Though around 10,000 seed bombs are planned to be dropped at Asola, around 90,000 more such balls will be created in the next few months and dropped across other parts of Delhi, including the central Ridge and northern Ridge,” the official said.

The experimental use of seed balls to boost the green cover of Aravallis has already been performed with in the past. In 2020, the Haryana forest department used drones to drop close to 500,000 seed balls in four districts of Faridabad, Yamunanagar, Panchkula, and Mahendergarh.

The initiative, however, turned out to be unsuccessful, according to Haryana forest department officials, with the drive not carried out again.

“Despite the innovative approach, the seeds did not germinate as expected when dispersed in the forest. The project aimed to use drone technology to efficiently plant seeds over large areas and expedite reforestation efforts. However, results indicated that this method did not facilitate the desired growth and germination of the seeds, highlighting the need for alternative strategies to support forest regeneration,” said a senior Haryana forest department official on condition of anonymity.

Experts said that a number of factors need to align for this to work out. Vijay Dhasmana, ecologist and curator at the Aravalli Biodiversity Park in Gurugram, said seed balls can work as a method of regeneration but they need to be dispersed before the monsoon arrives.

“Once the monsoon arrives, grasses do not allow many species to grow. Ideally, this should have been done before June and so when the first rains hit, they start to grow. The technique also depends on the kind of species chosen as not all native species will germinate and grow this way. Seed balls are ideal for grasses and any pioneer species,” Dhasmana said.

This year, the Delhi government has set a target of planting 6.4 million saplings across Delhi – up from the 5.2 million target set for last year.

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