Digital demarcation of deemed forests begins in Delhi

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The Delhi government has identified and is in the process of digitally demarcating over 2,000 hectares of land and over 450km of roads and drains as deemed forests, the state forest department has said in an affidavit submitted to the Delhi high court last month.

Environmental activists welcomed the move to demarcate deemed forests, but said it should have been undertaken earlier, and urged forest officials to regularly carry out such exercises.

A deemed forest is not a notified or a reserve forest, but is considered a forest. The concept came into existence following a Supreme Court judgement in 1996 (TN Godavarman vs Union of India). Different states have different definitions for deemed forest, with Delhi defining it as any area over 2.5 acres and having over 100 trees per acre. Similarly, 1km stretches of roads and drains with the same density are also considered deemed forests.

Forest officials, in an affidavit to the high court submitted on December 19, said they are using geographic information systems (GIS) to digitally define boundaries of deemed forests using both 1997 data — when such forests were first identified in Delhi — and using the latest India State of Forest Report (ISFR), 2021.

HT has seen a copy of the affidavit.

In another letter attached to the affidavit, the forest department has informed the high court that it has asked each of Delhi's four deputy conservators of forests (DCFs) to physically identify deemed forests in their jurisdiction.

Speaking on the matter, a forest official, declining to be named, said all green patches meeting the criteria for deemed forests based on the 2021 report have automatically been considered for demarcation, with a physical survey also underway to categorise more green patches as deemed forests.

"Over 1,000 hectares of deemed forest land has already been identified and subsequently, been digitally demarcated on maps using satellite imagery and GIS data," the official said, adding that around 1,000 hectares is currently in process of being demarcated.

"Each DCF is carrying out physical checks, after identifying green patches using satellites. Once the criteria is met, we are reaching out to land-owning agencies too for reconfirmation of the same," said the official.

According to the official, once the demarcation process is complete, the boundaries will be considered sacrosanct, allowing the department to take action required for its protection. Similarly, if permissions to carry out construction or commercial activities are to be awarded, the department will know the exact boundaries of a deemed forest.

Bhavreen Kandhari, an environmental activist, said the exercise to identify and demarcate deemed forests needed to be done much earlier. "Though the move is welcome, this should have been done regularly over the last two decades," she said.

HT had reported last week that the forest department had sought clarification from the Centre if deemed forests identified in the past, but no longer meeting the density criteria, could be used for development purposes.

"Over time, these stretches of roads have lost density of trees that do not meet the criteria conveyed in the affidavit filed by conservator of forest, government of India...in the Supreme Court of India. Now, for various developmental activities such as road expansion, metro corridor and other developments, agencies submit their application for tree felling on such stretches of roads which are listed in the aforementioned affidavit as deemed forests. It is requested to kindly clarify whether the criteria of

deemed forests and areas mentioned in the said affidavit filed in Supreme Court by GNCTD still qualify the status of deemed forests or not." the letter had said.

Responding to the query by the forest department, Kandhari said, "Instead of looking to carry out developmental work, we should be restoring these forests by planting more saplings, particularly along roads."

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