

TOI explains: Why are Uttarakhand forests turning into unmanageable infernos?

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DEHRADUN: Of Uttarakhand's 53,483sqkm geographical area, forest cover comprises 24,305 sq km — a staggering 44.5%, the latest biennial report by the Forest Survey of India (FSI) says. Within these forests, 0.2% are classified as extremely fire-prone, 1.6% as very highly prone, 9.3% as highly prone, 21.7% as moderately prone, and 67.25% as less fire-prone. The Uttarakhand forest department manages roughly 13 forest types spread across approximately 25 lakh hectares. Notably, the highly flammable Chir pine forests, covering 3.94 lakh hectares, dominate the forests. These trees, characterised by their dry needles, significantly contribute to fire spread.

“Uttarakhand's rural community depends on the forestland for their socio-economic survival,” said Nishant Verma, the nodal officer of forest fires and disaster management in Uttarakhand's forest department. “The traditional practice of burning forest floor in hope of stimulating new grass growth, spreading of fires due to agricultural residue burning near forest fringes are the top reasons for the fires in forests.”

Despite efforts such as creating over 50,000km of firelines to curb wildfire spread, the state faces challenges due to restrictions on tree felling imposed by a Supreme Court ruling in 1981. This ruling prohibits green tree felling above 1000 meters throughout the country, prompting current efforts by the state to seek permission for tree enumeration.

“A fire triangle requires fuel, heat, and oxygen for ignition,” noted a senior silviculturist in Uttarakhand. “So, if we

remove the fuel — Chir Pine needles — the fires would remain normal.”

While natural causes like excess biomass contribute to forest fires, human activities exacerbate the situation. “In Uttarakhand, villagers are forest-dependent for fodder of livestock and fuel wood,” Verma added. “They often clear the forest land since olden times.”

Highlighting the importance of community involvement in fire prevention, the silviculturist emphasised the need to engage local youth and women in forest management efforts. “Involving local youth and women can play a game-changer for Uttarakhand,” he said. “In Uttarakhand, we have surface fires. Therefore we can easily prevent wildfires, we don’t see crown fires here, which are very destructive.”

In April this year, the forest department received 7,000-odd alerts for small and large forest fires from the Forest Survey of India (FSI), a significant increase from the 925 alerts received during the same period last year. “Long dry spells across the Himalayas are also among the reasons behind these fires,” said Shekhar Pathak, a historian from Kumaon.

“Factors ranging from careless people partying close to the forest area and tossing lit cigarettes and bonfires are also contributing factors,” Verma added. Despite efforts to combat man-made fires, forest officials have registered at least 150 forest fires as being man-made this year, with approximately 20 cases leading to legal action against identified individuals.