

Tree loss to be reimbursed with plantations in Dibang Valley

27 April 2020

Under the Forest Conservation Act 1980, every time forest land is diverted for non-forest purposes such as mining or industry, the project developer is supposed to identify non-forest land of an equal area and also pay for planting forests over this, or when that is not available, on twice the area of degraded forest land.



Environmentalists and local residents are now concerned that the same ecological value cannot be recreated through artificial plantations in fragmented patches of land.(HT file photo. Representative image)

For the 270,000 trees that will be felled to make way for the 3,097 megawatt Etalin hydropower project in Arunachal Pradesh's Dibang Valley, compensatory plantations will be raised in 25 different fragmented lots of land in the Valley's Anini town, according to the project proposal. The rest will be taken up on land that's over 400 kilometres away in Tawang district.

Under the Forest Conservation Act 1980, every time forest land is diverted for non-forest purposes such as mining or industry, the project developer is supposed to identify non-forest land of an equal area and also pay for planting forests over this, or when that is not available, on twice the area of degraded forest land.

The project is being developed by—M/s Etalin Hydro Electric Power Company Limited, a joint venture of Hydro Power Development Corporation of Arunachal Pradesh Limited with Jindal Power Limited (JPL). The total cost of the project is approximately Rs 25,296.95 crores according to the fact sheet.

The proposed project, which is yet to get approval from the environment ministry's forest advisory committee (FAC), is located in "subtropical evergreen broad-leaved forest and subtropical rain forests" and is home to outstanding biodiversity, according to the FAC's own documents.

Environmentalists and local residents are now concerned that the same ecological value cannot be recreated through artificial plantations in fragmented patches of land.

Compensatory afforestation for the project has been proposed over 1,074.329 hectares at a cost of Rs 19.6 crores, according to an FAC factsheet on the project reviewed by Hindustan Times .

"So far in India we haven't seen compensatory afforestation plots providing ecosystem and biodiversity services. There is also a concern that in many places monocultures have sprung up in the name of afforestation. There is no land to do such large-scale plantations either, so often public or forest lands are used. The spirit of compensatory afforestation is missing," said NH Ravindranath, climate and forestry expert at the Indian Institute of Science, Bangalore.

He added that the acreage earmarked for the afforestation appears too small for plantations of the scale required to compensate for the trees to be felled to make for the Etalin project. "The forests that will be diverted appear to be dense as they have thousands of trees over 60 cm in girth. A lot may be lost," he added.

FAC's factsheet, dated April 21, states that around 141,854 trees that are above 60 cm in girth which will have to be cleared.

Local people of the Idu Mishmi community are concerned about the loss of native forests and wildlife and say they may end up losing grazing land for compensatory afforestation too.

"There are two dams {proposed} in this region—the Dibang multipurpose project and the Etalin hydropower project -- which will together submerge a very large area. Most families in the project affected area don't want to speak against the project because they want to get compensation for their land," Aito Miwu, a resident of Anini, said over the phone

"People in other parts of Dibang valley are not consulted and not allowed to speak up about the ecological loss in public hearings. The vegetation and biodiversity through compensatory afforestation cannot be the same. I have seen them planting pine which has no fertiliser value and nothing grows underneath pine trees," he said.

"These patches of land selected by the government are Mithun grazing land. One of the patches is in our village and none of us has been consulted about converting common grazing land. Many villages will oppose this," he added.

There is no mention in the FAC factsheet whether locals have been consulted on carrying out compensatory afforestation on grazing lands.

"The FAC's investigations have taken at face value the process of compensatory afforestation in a landscape like Arunachal Pradesh. This project will not only submerge old growth forests on mountain slopes, the compensatory afforestation measures proposed will governmentalize forest areas that are socially and economically accessible to communities as village forest reserves. Why have they not assessed how community access will be affected by these measures," said Manju Menon, a senior fellow at the Centre for Policy Research.

According to FAC's factsheet, the project falls under the richest biogeographical province of the Himalayan zone and under one of the mega biodiversity hotspots of the world. The proposed project location falls at the junction of the Palearctic, Indo-Chinese, and Indo-Malayan biogeographic regions, having luxuriant forests and a plethora of flora and fauna. It is also a "vital tiger area."

One of the FAC's members, responding to a query from HT, said over the phone: "I am only a member. It will not be appropriate for me to comment on this matter. The FAC minutes will be published soon."

FAC discussed the issue of forest clearance to the project on April 23, but a decision hasn't yet been taken, according to FAC members. "We had a long discussion and all views of members have been taken on record. Most members had a favourable view because its a clean energy project, so did the subcommittee that visited the site," said FAC member. Both FAC members requested anonymity.

A sub-committee of the FAC has recommended in their report dated April 21 that Etalin Hydroelectric Project of 3097 MW be allowed with a condition that the developer deposit money for wildlife conservation in the area.

"We have been eagerly waiting for this clearance which is a must for grant of forest clearance for the project. The proposal for grant of FC to Etalin project was submitted to environment ministry in 2014. The proposal has since been discussed in FAC a couple of times. In the EAC meeting scheduled to be held on April 23, the report and recommendations of sub-committee of FAC will be discussed for final recommendations on grant of FC to the project. We are hopeful that FAC will finally be recommending the proposal for grant of FC," Bharat Rohra, MD & CEO, Jindal Power Limited had said on April 22 responding to HT's queries.

Source: <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/tree-loss-to-be-reimbursed-with-plantations-in-dibang-valley/story-I3EldUENtAIPtL9x9WXooJ.html>