

BALANCE ECOLOGY AND ECONOMY - EDITORIALS - HINDUSTAN TIMES

Relevant for: Environment | Topic: Environmental Conservation, Sustainable Development, and EIA

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The environment ministry has proposed a controversial scheme through which infrastructure projects involving diversion of forest land could compensate for loss of forests by buying ready-made plantations. Titled Green Credit Scheme, the policy, once finalised, will overhaul the compensatory afforestation process by accrediting private or public-private partnership companies to raise plantations near reserved forests which can be bought in lieu of projects involving forest diversion. If the company raising the plantation doesn't wish to trade it, it can retain it and harvest the timber once ready.

Under the Forest Conservation Act 1980, each time forest land is diverted for non-forest purposes like mining or industry, the project developer is supposed to identify land and pay for planting forests over an equal area of non-forest land, or when that is not available, twice the area of degraded forest land. This money currently gets collected under the compensatory afforestation fund. But under the scheme, some argue there is delay in accessing compensatory afforestation funds to raise plantations; difficulty in acquiring land near the site of diversion; delay in undertaking afforestation leading to cost overruns for projects which hurt industry, and poor survival of plantations.

The new proposal of trading in plantations has, however, raised concerns about biodiversity and tenurial rights. Plantations cannot replace the biodiversity value of native natural forests. This is a grouse against the existing compensatory afforestation process also. The new proposal pre-empts diversion of forest land, and hence facilitates readily available plantation plots to ensure ease of doing business. If companies are allowed to develop commercial plantations on so-called degraded forest land, it can fragment forests and lead to handing over of forest land to private entities. If plantations bought are located in a faraway spot, it also deprives forests, animals and people of ecological services. The environment ministry should, instead, consider a policy to minimise diversion of rich forests and maintain the sanctity of contiguous forests.

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