

SC BARS STATES FROM DIVERTING MONEY FROM CAMPA FUNDS

Relevant for: Environment & Disaster Management | Topic: Environmental Conservation, Sustainable Development & EIA

The Supreme Court has barred State governments from diverting money from their Compensatory Afforestation and Management Planning Authority (CAMPA) funds meant for environmental protection, rehabilitation of displaced persons due to issues like depletion of forest, mining, etc.

The apex court's order came after realising that the Punjab government took Rs. 1.11 crore from CAMPA funds and to pay its lawyers and other legal expenses.

A Bench of Justices Madan B. Lokur, S. Abdul Nazeer and Deepak Gupta, on October 1, ordered the Punjab government to reimburse Rs. 1,11,01,420 to its CAMPA funds within a fortnight. The court discovered the diversion of funds from a document prepared by the Principal Chief Conservator of Forests, Punjab, and placed on record before the Bench.

"It is made clear that no State government can use the funds for any activity other than afforestation," the apex court cautioned State governments.

The court was hearing a *suo motu* case titled In Re: National CAMPA Advisory Council. This is part of a major effort by the Supreme Court since 1995 to prevent and monitor environmental degradation. The idea of having CAMPA funds and authority was introduced by the apex court. The periodic orders of the court in this litigation finally led to the birth of The Compensatory Afforestation Fund Act of 2016.

In a March 2018 order, the Supreme Court recorded that the total amount in CAMPA funds is "tentatively put in the region of Rs. .70,000-75,000 crore approximately" and likely to go even higher.

The apex court had observed that this was a "huge amount" which can be used for the benefit of environmental protection and rehabilitation of persons displaced by environmental causes. Availability of these amounts will not only help the States/UTs and local communities to ensure better management of their forest resources.

The 2016 Act's objective is promote conservation, protection, improvement and expansion of forest and wildlife resources of the country.

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