

Govt against commercial use of degraded forests

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New Delhi : The government has decided not to allow diversion of degraded forests for commercial uses even if it is mandated by the Supreme Court, despite the recommendation of the Ashok Chawla committee on natural resources.

The decision is based on the apprehension that such de-reservation will be seen going against the interests of tribal communities who often occupy such land.

The committee under former finance secretary Ashok Chawla on allocation of eight natural resources had recommended seeking "permission of the Supreme Court to evolve guidelines for de-reservation of such land currently classified as forest, which is not and conceivably cannot be, reclaimed as forest".

This is the only one of the 81 recommendations made by the committee that has not passed muster with the government. 69 have been accepted for implementation and another eleven are "still under consideration".

The reason for rejecting any plans to allow diversion of even degraded land in forest areas for commercial purposes is that this would run counter to the Forest Rights Act. This Act was framed by the UPA-I government with Rahul Gandhi seen to be a prime mover for it. So the government is unwilling to play around with it.

This could mean abandoning mining areas in several states as the land above them are inhabited or used by tribal population.

However, the government, aware of the sensitivities around the subject, has decided to go along with the current position of no-go policy for them.

A presentation made to Prime Minister Manmohan Singh by the department of economic affairs in the ministry of finance in May has endorsed this position.

"It was decided that all the 69 recommendations agreed to by the Group of Ministers would be pursued for implementation by individual ministries in a timely manner," a letter issued by the department on this subject to the concerned ministries noted.

A monitoring mechanism has been set up under the Cabinet secretariat to check on the implementation of the accepted recommendations. It would mean submission of quarterly status reports to the Prime Minister.