

ESA tag on 57,000 sq km of Western Ghats in new draft notification

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The Western Ghats (Photo | File/EPS)

By Richa Sharma

Express News Service

NEW DELHI: Nearly 57,000 sq km of the Western Ghats should be declared as Ecologically Sensitive Area (ESA), the Union environment ministry has said in a new draft notification. This would mean projects like mining, quarrying, and thermal power plants must be banned in the region, which spans six states.

ALSO READ: Ministry watered down Gadgil panel report that ensured protection of Western Ghats: Experts

The ministry prepared its notification after coming under fire from the National Green Tribunal (NGT) for not finalising the ESA in the region. The NGT, in a September-4 order, restricted six states from giving environmental clearance for activities that could harm eco-sensitive areas, saying the region was under serious stress. It took the matter into cognizance after the deadly Kerala floods. The ministry has sought public comments on its draft notification for 60 days, after which the ESA will be finalised.

ENVIRONMENT experts say that the ministry has watered down Gadgil panel report that ensured protection of the Western Ghats. UNESCO has included certain identified parts of Western Ghats in the UNESCO World Natural Heritage List as it is home to rich endemic biodiversity. In 2010, the UPA government began the process of declaring ESAs by constituting the Madhav Gadgil committee. The report was junked after protest from all states, especially Kerala, saying that it hampered development and large habitations.

Subsequently, a high-level working group under former ISRO chairman K Kasturirangan gave a report in 2013 recommending 37 per cent (60,000 hectares) of the Western Ghats as ecologically sensitive areas. However, the states were still not satisfied. In places identified as ESAs, projects such as mining, quarrying, sand mining, thermal power plants are not allowed. Environmental activist Himanshu Thakkar says, “If we want to protect the fragile Western Ghats and people staying therein, we need to seriously implement Gadgil committee recommendations... This notification is for only 37 per cent of the area.”

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