

**Mahesh Kulkarni** | Chennai/ Coonoor (Tamil Nadu) September 29, 2012 Last Updated at 00:32 IST

## 'Plantation will not harm Western Ghats' biodiversity'

Union minister of state for commerce Jyotiraditya Scindia on Friday allayed fears on any adverse effect of plantation crops on the rich biodiversity of the Western Ghats.

“Cultivation of plantation crops in the Western Ghats will not affect its rich bio-diversity or disturb the ecological balance between flora and fauna in the region as feared,” Scindia said at a planters’ conference here.

The rich biodiversity of the Western Ghats is safe and free from adverse effect from plantation crops grown on slopes, he told the 119th annual conference of United Planters’ Association of South India (Upasi), here.

Though the Western Ghats’ ecological expert panel, set up by the Ministry of Environment and Forest (MoEF), recommended promoting organic agriculture and discouraging cultivation of plantation crops on slopes exceeding 30 per cent, Scindia said his ministry had differed with panel’s observations and conclusions.

“We have sent our views to the MoEF, clarifying that growing plantation crops in the Ghats will not damage the region’s bio-diversity,” Scindia said. Originating from Maharashtra, the 1,600-km Western Ghats range runs through Goa, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu and Kerala, converging at Kanyakumari. The Ghats is home to over 5,000 exotic species of flowering plants, 139 mammalian species, 508 bird species and 179 amphibian species. The Western Ghats Ecology Expert Panel (WGEEP) has designated the entire hill range as an ecologically-sensitive area. The panel, in its report, has classified the 142 taluks in the Western Ghats boundary into Ecologically Sensitive Zones (ESZ) 1, 2 and 3. It recommended that “no new dams based on large-scale storage be permitted in Ecologically Sensitive Zone 1.

Since both hydel project sites — Athirappilly in Kerala and Gundia in Karnataka — fall in Ecologically Sensitive Zone 1, these projects should not be accorded environmental clearance,” it said.

Upasi outgoing president D Hegde, in his speech, had cautioned the MoEF against implementing the Gadgil panel’s recommendations, as they would sound death knell for the plantation sector.

“We have represented to the MoEF not to pursue the recommendations as it is going to be difficult for the plantation sector to survive,” Hegde said in his presidential address.

The Gadgil panel also proposed phasing out use of chemical pesticides, insecticides, fungicides and weedicides in three-to-five years in ecological sensitive zone one (ESZ1), eight-to-ten years in ESZ2 and ESZ3.