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Task force to help prevent flora, fauna loss from forest fires

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NEW DELHI: Alarmed by the 125% increase in forest fires from Kerala to J&K in the last two years despite the Centre formulating a National Action Plan on Forest Fire (NAPFF), the National Green Tribunal has set up a national taskforce to implement the national plan to prevent loss of flora and fauna.

Forest fires have come to be accepted as an annual occurrence and little has been done to stop destruction of thousands of hectares of forests, leading to enormous pollution as well as loss of flora and fauna. Senior advocate Rajiv Dutta had moved the NGT last year for coordinated action between central and state agencies for preventive measures.

On his petition and the NGT's endeavour, the ministry of environment and forests had informed the tribunal on April 23 last year that NAPFF had been adopted by the central government to minimise forest fires and allied issues. The NAPFF focussed on awareness campaigns to enlist support of forest dwellers and those living near forests to tackle fires as well as increase the resilience of forests through moisture retention plans and management of forest biomass and weeds.

However, taking note of the ministry's report indicating 125% increase in forest fires in Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Uttarakhand, Himachal Pradesh and J&K, Dutta moved the NGT afresh last month seeking monitoring of the national plan's implementation.

On Dutta's plea, an NGT bench of Justice A K Goel, judicial members S P Wangdi, K Ramakrishnan and environmental member

Nagin Nanda summoned the inspector general of forests in charge of forest protection and forest fires, who said that based on Moderate Resolution Imaging Spectroradiometer data, 74 forest fire hotspots were identified.

After hearing both sides, the NGT bench said implementation of the comprehensive action plan against forest fires required a robust institutional mechanism in view of the increase in the number of forest fires.

“Such mechanism may comprise of representatives of ministry of environment, forests and climate change; Central Pollution Control Board; Wildlife Institute of India, Dehradun; National Disaster Management Authority; Indian Council of Forestry Research and Education, Dehradun; Forest Survey of India and National Remote Sensing Centre, Hyderabad, representing the central government on the one hand and the principal chief conservator of forests of all states/UTs on the other,” the bench ordered while asking the Union environment secretary to head the committee. It asked the central committee to hold its first meeting in three weeks.

It allowed the environment ministry to co-opt other experts into the committee and asked it to meet once every three months to “address all issues arising out of forest fires, including effective implementation of NAPFF.

It asked the Indian Council of Forestry Research and Education, which has been asked to standardise protocols for estimating the affected area and losses due to forest fires for reporting to various levels, to expedite the process and conclude the task in three months.