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## Rule change brings new risks to India's forests

Defining monoculture as forestry may cause severe ecological damage and derail conservation efforts



**Giridhar Kulkarni** Last Updated : 16 January 2026, 03:00 IST

In a move that has sparked alarm among environmentalists, retired forest officials, tribal rights advocates, and legal experts alike, the Union Ministry of Environment, Forests and Climate Change (MoEFCC) has quietly re-engineered the guidelines governing forest land in India. On January 2, 2026, the Ministry issued a circular redefining how plantation and afforestation activities on forest land are classified, effectively de-linking them from long-standing environmental safeguards such as compensatory afforestation and Net Present Value (NPV) charges.



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Under the amended guidelines – framed within the Van (Sanrakshan Evam Samvardhan) Adhiniyam, the law that now replaces the Forest Conservation Act – government and non-government entities can undertake plantations and afforestation work on forest land, so long as they align with working plans of the state forest department. These activities are now categorised as “forestry activity”, thereby exempting them from the requirement to compensate for ecological loss or pay NPV, a charge historically used to internalise the environmental costs of diverting forest land.

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On the surface, this may appear to be a bureaucratic technicality or a policy tweak to boost green cover. But the implications go far deeper, and potentially far darker.

Plantations – especially commercial ones – are not equivalent to natural forests. While forests support complex ecosystems with rich biodiversity, carbon sequestration, soil stability, and water regulation, monoculture plantations of fast-growing species such as eucalyptus, teak, or acacia deliver far fewer ecological services. They are designed for timber, pulp, and other extractive economic uses, not habitat health. Experts have warned that incentivising such plantations on forest land could irrevocably alter soil quality, reduce groundwater recharge, and displace indigenous flora and fauna.

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The new guidelines allowing commercial plantations directly conflict with ongoing efforts to restore native forests. Across many forest areas, the extraction of teak, acacia, and eucalyptus is being carried out under approved working plans to rehabilitate degraded lands and encourage natural regeneration. Even these carefully managed interventions, however, have unintended ecological consequences: monoculture plantations often facilitate the spread of invasive weeds such as eupatorium, lantana, and senna, which outcompete native species and reduce habitat quality. The new policy, by promoting additional commercial monocultures without safeguards, risks undermining these restoration efforts and further compromising ecological resilience.

The stripping away of compensatory afforestation and NPV requirements – which both serve as ecological and financial safeguards – fundamentally alters the balance between conservation and commercial interest. These mechanisms ensured that when forest land was diverted, measures were taken to restore equivalent ecological value elsewhere, funded by the project proponents themselves. Removing them hands an enormous advantage to private and public actors alike, giving them a free rein to cultivate and profit from forest land with little accountability.

This shift does not occur in a vacuum. The debate over opening forest land for corporate plantations has simmered for decades, resurfacing periodically as India's demand for paper, timber, and wood products has grown. Previous proposals – such as leasing millions of hectares of degraded forest to private companies – were shelved amid concerns over forest-dependent livelihoods and environmental degradation. The current change in rules risks reopening that conflict.

Critically, this policy shift takes place against the backdrop of broader legal changes to the Forest Conservation Act over the past three years. Amendments passed in 2023

– now incorporated into the Van Adhiniyam – have already been criticised for weakening key protections, narrowing the definition of forest, and potentially diluting compliance with the Forest Rights Act, which recognises the role of tribal and forest-dependent communities.

#### The future of forest governance

Forest governance in the country has always been a complex interplay of ecology, economics, and rights. Tribal communities and village gram sabhas have fought long and hard for legal recognition under the Forest Rights Act, asserting their custodianship over forests and the resources they depend on. Yet, by facilitating private plantation activity on forest land with minimal environmental safeguards, the government risks sidelining the very communities that have traditionally acted as stewards of these landscapes. This is especially concerning in regions such as central and eastern India, where indigenous peoples' livelihoods, food security, and cultural identity are closely tied to forest ecosystems.

The official line from the MoEFCC insists that these changes are intended to help achieve India's ambitious target of 33% forest cover and to bring in additional resources for restoration work. There is merit in mobilising resources for genuine forest restoration. But conflating commercial plantations with ecological restoration confuses ends with means. The danger is that in pursuit of headline metrics such as tree-planting numbers, India will lose the substance of its forests: their biodiversity, ecological functionality, and the livelihoods of those who depend on them.

The recent changes should not pass without robust public scrutiny. Forest policy ought to be transparently debated, informed by science, and rooted in constitutional and legal commitments to environmental protection and community rights. Diluting protections in the name of expediency or economic convenience sets a perilous precedent, one that jeopardises India's ecological security and violates the stewardship responsibilities owed to future generations.

We should all be wary of policies that prioritise commercial plantings over living forests. India's forests are more than raw materials; they are irreplaceable reservoirs of biodiversity, carbon storage, and climate resilience. Once lost or irreversibly altered, these natural systems cannot be replaced by monoculture plantations. Protecting them is not just a policy question; it is a moral and ecological imperative.

Replacing living forests with monocultures is not conservation; it's a corporate lease on nature.

(The writer is a wildlife conservationist)

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