

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Why did we take up this audit?

The National Forest Policy, 1988 aims to substantially increase forest/tree cover in the country through massive Afforestation and Social Forestry Programme, especially on denuded, degraded and unproductive lands. The State Government adopted and implemented the Uttar Pradesh Forest Policy in 1998. In October 2017, the State Government formulated and adopted its new State Forest Policy. Department of Environment, Forest & Climate Change, Government of Uttar Pradesh (Forest Department) is mandated to manage, conserve and protect forest and wildlife resources in the State through Afforestation and Social Forestry Programmes for regeneration of degraded forest land as well as socio-economic upliftment of people and sustainable management of forest and wildlife.

To achieve the above objective of increase in forest cover, the State Government has been taking large scale plantation drive and it fixed a target of planting 101.35 crore saplings during 2016-17 to 2021-22 in Uttar Pradesh against which the achievement was 103.78 crore saplings.

The plantation activities in the State of Uttar Pradesh are funded through various Central and State Government schemes such as Social Forestry, Green Belt Development Scheme, Total Forest Cover Scheme, Plantation under Compensatory Afforestation Fund Management and Planning Authority (CAMPA) and Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS), etc. During 2016-17 to 2021-22, the State Forest Department incurred expenditure of ₹ 3,459.69 crore¹ on plantation and conservation of forest.

The Performance Audit of 'Afforestation and Social Forestry Programme' was undertaken to assess whether action plans, schemes and programme relating to afforestation and social forestry were implemented economically, effectively and efficiently; funds were available, fund flow was synchronised with plantation schedule and funds were utilised as per approved plans by the Forest Department as well as by the other Departments; the diversion of forest land and execution/renewal of lease was as per extant laws/rules; and the Department had adequate system for monitoring, evaluation and control.

What audit found and what do we recommend?

Audit observed that there were deficiencies in planning, execution, evaluation and monitoring of the plantation activities which has been discussed in the Performance Audit Report.

Planning: Audit found deficiencies in preparation of working plans of the Divisions of the Forest Department and Rural Development Department. Prescriptions² of working plans were also not adhered. There was rush of expenditure in the closing months of the financial year by the Forest Department in contravention of financial rules.

1 Including expenditure of ₹ 1,216.79 crore from CAMPA Fund.

2 Prescriptions of the working plans refers to prescribed activities for the respective Forest Divisions in the working plans.

Execution of Plantation activities: The Forest Department incorrectly included the plantation against diversion of forest land and beating up³ in achievement of annual plantation targets which was not permissible.

The plantation under MGNREGS done by Rural Development Department (RDD) had high mortality rate during 2016-17 to 2021-22.

Plantation under CAMPA: The Forest Department short recovered the Compensatory Afforestation (CA) charges and centage charges from the user agencies. The Department did not register lease agreements as per the Registration Act, 1908 and also short realised premium/ lease rent.

Monitoring, Evaluation and Internal Control Mechanism: The Forest Department and Rural Development Department failed to monitor the plantation activities properly due to deficient monitoring and evaluation system as the Forest Department failed to upload the required data on the e-Green Watch portal meant for concurrent monitoring and evaluation of the plantation activities carried out from CAMPA fund. The Department also failed to maintain accuracy of data on the PMS portal, designed for the purpose of effective and transparent management and monitoring of plantation. The Forest Department also failed to evict encroachments in the forest area and prevent new encroachments. Instances of payment for doubtful plantation works using false vehicle numbers were also noticed.

The decrease in forest cover by 100 square km during 2017 to 2021 in recorded forest area indicates that plantation activities of the Forest Department failed to achieve the objectives of the National/State Forest Policy

Recommendations

Audit recommends that:

- **Forest Department/Rural Development Department may prepare valid working plans timely and strictly adhere with its prescriptions for sustainable management of forest in the State.**
- **The State Government may issue clear guidelines to control the rush of expenditure in the closing month of the financial year.**
- **The Forest Department should strictly follow the guidelines for compensatory afforestation and should levy and realise the compensatory afforestation charges, additional NPV and centage charges from the user agencies as per extant instructions.**
- **The Forest Department may ensure uploading of complete and correct data and filling of all fields of the modules of e-Green Watch portal. Further, monitoring and periodical reporting of plantations raised by the Rural Development Department may be ensured by the Department in co-ordination with the Forest Department.**
- **The Forest Department may ensure time bound eviction of encroachment of forest land in co-ordination with other concerned Government Departments as per Forest Conservation Act, 1980 and its guidelines.**

3 Beating up is replacement of plants found dead in next rainy season of plantation.

- **The Forest officials should conduct prescribed inspections and verify plantation activities for efficient monitoring of the plantation activities.**
- **The Forest Department may investigate the cases and fix responsibility for payment for plantation works claimed to be executed using false vehicle numbers.**