

ESA demarcation: greens fear loss of forestland to encroachers

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The field-level verification to demarcate Ecologically Sensitive Areas (ESA) identified by the Kasturirangan committee for conservation of the Western Ghats is set to begin on Thursday, amid fears that the government decision to earmark only protected forests as ESA would impact the move to recover forestland from encroachers.

The panchayat-level committees in 119 villages are set to begin the verification to fine-tune the block-level cadastral maps prepared by the Kerala State Biodiversity Board by earmarking the ESAs at the survey-number level. Chief Minister Oommen Chandy has directed district collectors to ensure that the process is completed by Friday.

The KSBB expects to compile the data from all districts and submit the report to the government by July 27.

Meanwhile, environmentalists and a section of government officials have expressed strong reservations over the decision to sub divide forestland and earmark it as non-ESA. They feel that it would pose a severe setback in the protracted legal battle to take back forestland from encroachers. It is estimated that more than 5,000 hectares of forests, mostly in Idukki and Wayanad districts, have been appropriated by land grabbers.

Congress MLA V.D. Satheesan has sought a review of the government move to restrict ESAs to protect forestland.

“How will this affect the government’s efforts to recover tens of thousands of acres of encroached forestland?” he asked in a Facebook post.

Pointing out that most of these cases were before the Forest Tribunal, High Court and Supreme Court, he said the government would lose its claim once it removed these areas from the ESA list.

“The government cannot regularise encroached forestland by giving it non-ESA status, as it comes under the Forest Conservation Act, 1980. On the other hand, ESAs have been defined under the Environment Protection Act applicable to non-forest areas,” he said.

The Kerala Sastra Sahitya Parishad (KSSP) has alleged that the government had allowed vested interests to hijack the demarcation of ESAs. Terming the field-level verification as an exercise to justify the government stand, KSSP general secretary P. Muraleedharan urged the government to adopt a comprehensive policy based on scientific facts for conservation of the Western Ghats.

A section of government officials fears that the decision to restrict ESAs to protected forests was dictated by political interests.

“Kerala will end up losing vast areas of forests to land grabbers. Conservation of the Western Ghats seems to be the last priority for the government,” said an official.

Source:
<http://www.thehindu.com/todays-paper/tp-national/tp-kerala/esa-demarcation-greens-fear-loss-of-forestland-to-encroachers/article7454541.ece>