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जंगलों में आग से उत्तराखंड शासन सतर्क

सुशील उपाध्याय देहरादून

उत्तराखंड के वन्य जीव विभाग द्वारा संचालित बिनासर अभयारण्य में तीन जगहों पर आग धधक उठने के बाद कार्बेट टाइगर रिजर्व का प्रशासन हाई अलर्ट पर आ गया है। इस राज्य में 100 से अधिक जगहों पर अप्रत्याशित रूप से जंगलों में आग लगी हुई है, जबकि अब तक 759 घटनाएं रिपोर्ट हुई हैं। खबरों के अनुसार, इन जगहों पर

लगी आग को बुझाने के लिए जूझ रही कई महिलाएं झुलस गई हैं। पिछले तीन सप्ताह से लगी आग के कारण ऊंचाई वाले इलाकों में भारी तबाही का मंजर है जबकि यहां के स्थानीय निवासियों समेत बाहर से आनेवाले मौसमी पर्यटकों और यात्रियों के स्वास्थ्य पर इसका बुरा असर पड़ने की आशंका जताई जा रही है। राजधानी देहरादून समेत राज्य के कई हिस्सों के आकाश में धुएं का बादल छाया हुआ है।



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UP IN FLAMES: A forest fire rages in Uttarakhand. The state has lost 3,120 hectares to such blazes this year.

The hills are on fire

Forest fires, caused by scanty rainfall and an age-old farm practice, have reduced 4,000 hectares in Himachal and Uttarakhand to ashes. And hapless villagers have only buckets of water to fight the blaze

Nihi Sharma, Archana Phull & Gaurav Bisht
Dehradun/Shimla, May 9

CHATAR SINGH Rawat, 65, a farmer in Rasaunlikhal village of Uttarakhand's Tehri district, around 70 km from Dehradun, lives in fear. Massive forest fires have destroyed large tracts of the hillside a few hundred metres from his village. He is scared his village may not escape the next blaze.

"Forest fires have made life miserable for us over the past few weeks. There is at least one large or small fire in the area everyday, which we have to douse with buckets of water drawn from a nearby stream and sticks," he said.

Rawat blamed scanty rainfall in the region for the spurt in forest fires in several parts of Garhwal and Kumaon in Uttarakhand and in neighbouring Himachal Pradesh.

Till May 8, about 1,289 forest fires burnt 3,120 hectares — an area larger than Noida — to ashes in Uttarakhand alone, killing five persons and injuring 15. The fires also destroyed 371 hectares in three national parks that are major tourist attractions — Nanda Devi, Rajaji and Corbett. Fortunately, there have been



no reports of animal deaths.

In Himachal, more than 1,000 hectares of hillside forests and farmland have been destroyed by such fires.

"Seventy-five per cent of forest fires originate in the farms. Villagers burn their fields and grasslands (called *ghasnis*) due to the belief that this rejuvenates and cleans the soil. Now that the temperature is high (average day temperatures are 39°C) and relative humidity is zero per cent, the fire spreads easily to nearby forests," Uttarakhand's Principal Chief Conservator of Forests R.B.S. Rawat told HT.

Three criminal cases have been registered under the Forest Act for causing fires intentionally in Nagiar, Swarghat and Rishikesh in Himachal's Bilaspur district.

The forests in these two states are most susceptible to fires between April and June,

when it is hot and dry. Areas with large concentrations of pine trees, which are highly inflammable, are particularly susceptible.

Over the years, incidents of forest fire and the areas affected have been growing. In 2006, about 5,000 hectares were affected; this grew rapidly to 6,000 hectares in 2007 and 7,500 hectares in 2008. This year, the area affected in the two states has crossed 4,000 hectares.

Himachal Forest Minister Jagat Prakash Nadda said: "Rapid response teams have been constituted in every forest range and divisional headquarters in the state to tackle these fires. We are also involving people and representatives of Panchyati Raj institutions to prevent and control these fires."

Uttarakhand has state-of-the-art satellite-linked equipment to detect/control fires, but Himachal lags behind on this score. "Modern firefighting equipment is too costly for a state like Himachal," said Pushpender Rana, Divisional Forest Officer, Bilaspur. This is the only district in Himachal that has a satellite detection system.

FAQs

How do forests catch fire?

The main cause of forest fires is intentional burning of grasslands located near forests by people. The idea behind this farm practice is to ensure better growth of grass in the next season, to burn the dead and dry stuff and clear the waste. Such fires spiral out of control most of the time and, helped by the wind, spread to the forests. Human negligence is another cause.

Do forest fires regenerate the soil?

The fire helps add nutrients to farmland as it burns the waste. But if the fire continues to rage, the top layer of the soil gets burnt and hardens. This makes the soil susceptible to erosion, even in mild showers.

How do developed countries fight forest fires?

They have sophisticated monitoring systems. Firefighting equipment includes helicopters and air tankers (fixed-wing aircraft), water enhancers like foams and gels and special fire retardants. They also have highly trained forest staff.

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