

Forest Fires in Himachal Pradesh

Why in news?

Recently, Himachal Pradesh (H.P.) is witnessing widespread forest fires across the region.

What is the status of forest fires in Himachal Pradesh?

- **Geography** - The state's total geographical area is 55,673 sq km, out of which 15,443 sq km is ***forest cover, which is 27.72% of the total area.***
- Chir Pine, Deodar, Oak, Kail, Fir and Spruce are some of the common trees found here.
- **Transformation of forests** - A crucial watershed moment in Indian forestry began with the construction of railways in the 1850s.
- From 1853 to 1910, the construction of around 80,000 kms of railway track led to an *assault on forests* and the *extinction of the customary rights of the people.*
- Between 1869 and 1885, 6.5 million sleepers were made of Deodar, and the *area for Chir pines was expanded* for timber and resin.
- Total trees from which resin was tapped between 1910 and 1920 increased from 2,60,000 to 21,35,000.
- **Forest fire** - It is an *uncontrolled fire in an area* of combustible vegetation that occurs in the countryside or rural area.
- **Higher incidence of forest fires** - According to the Himachal Pradesh Forest department, there have been a ***total of 1,684 forest fires since April 2024.***

Uttarakhand and Himachal, two of India's Himalayan states, ranked first and second among states where most fire alerts had been sounded in 2023-2024.

- **Impact** - These fires have *damaged a total of 17,471 hectares of forest land*, resulting in significant loss to wildlife.
- From 2001 to 2023, H.P. has *lost 957 hectares of tree cover* from fires and 4.37 thousand hectares from all other drivers of loss.

To know more about Forest Fires in India, Click [here](#)

What are the cause for forest fires in the state?

Natural Causes	Man-made Causes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lightening • Rubbing of Bamboo with each other • Depletion of snowmelt water in pre-monsoon summer • Less moisture content • Dry leaf litter on the surface 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conversion of Banj oak with Chir pine for timber • Unattended campfires • Discarded cigarettes • Slash and Burn cultivation • Deforestation for developmental activities

- **Natural causes** - It relates to *lightning* or *rubbing of dry bamboos* with each other can sometimes result in fires.
- **Depletion of snow** - Fires in the Himalayas occur during the pre-monsoon summer period of *moisture stress*, due to the resultant *depletion of snowmelt water*.
- **Less moisture content** - The less moisture there is, the *greater the impact of the fires*.
- **Dry leaf litter** - Fallen tree leaves, dry grass, weeds, low brushwood, deadwood on the forest floor, logs and stumps etc *form the surface fuels*.
- **Climate Changes** - There is higher incidence of heatwaves and droughts in recent times that are favoring forest fires.
- **Faulty Human practices** - The primary causes of these forest fires are faulty forestry practices, and *treating forests from a utilitarian perspective*, excluding people's participation.
- **Irrational human activities** - Activities like *unattended campfires, discarded cigarettes* etc., are also some of the common causes for forest fires.
- **Slash and Burn practices** - When people burn their fields to clear them of stubble, dry grass or undergrowth, the *fire sometimes spreads to the adjoining forest*.
- **Replacement of the Banj oak with Chir pine** - [Chir pine](#) forests are very vulnerable to forest fires.
- Ecologically, *Banj forests absorb a high content of rainwater*, leading to better moisture retention and water springs in the mountains.

What are the impacts of forest fires?

- **Environment degradation** - These fires are also a major source of pollutants, including black carbon.
- It can significantly contribute to glacier melt in the Himalayas and negatively influences the regional climate.
- **Low Productivity** - Forests help maintain aquifers and continuous flow of streams and springs, and provide firewood, fodder and non-timber produce to the local communities all these capacities may get adversely affected in case of a fire.
- **Invasion by exotic species** - Moisture-loving trees such as ***Oaks and Deodars*** may give way to other species and exotic weeds.
- **Erosion** - Forest fires may destroy organic matter in the soil and expose the top layer to erosion.
- **Danger to wildlife** - Fires may also impact the wildlife by burning eggs, killing young

animals and driving the adult animals away from their safe haven.

- **Affect human settlements** - Sometimes, a forest fire may get out of control and extend to human settlements, thus posing danger to human life and property.

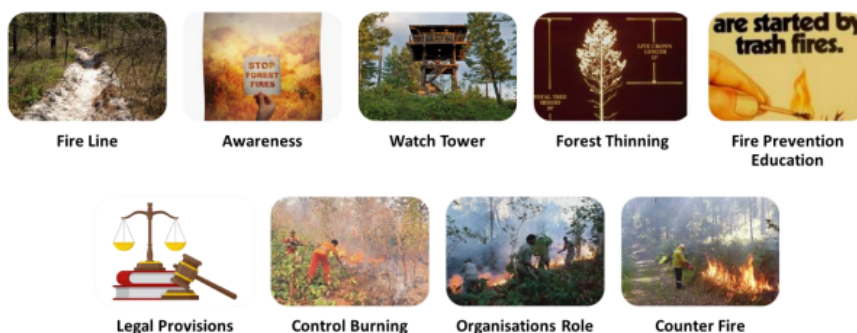
What lies ahead?

- **Democratise forests** - It is essential to ensure that people and communities who have lived in and around forests are made part of the forest management process.
- **Restore community rights** - The rights of the local community have been periodically curtailed, and as a result, when forest fires start, first responders are nowhere to be found.
- The traditional forest rights of Himalayan dwellers included the right to extract wood for fuel, timber, fodder, and other activities.
- **Promote peoples participation** - There is a need for involving local communities in decision making of development based projects in the state.
- Create environmental services at the village level.

*Himachal Pradesh is under **Schedule V of the Indian Constitution**, which requires community assent for development activities in the region. However, for large projects like hydro power generation, road widening, and four-lane highways, forests are being diverted with ease.*

- **Increase biodiversity** - Build mixed forestry and remove pine trees.
- **Enhance knowledge convergence** - There is a need to ensure that both scientific and community knowledge converge and forest management is conducted in a participatory manner.
- **Build infrastructural solutions** - We need to implement check dams and other methods to revive water springs.
- **Seek disaster management funds** - We need to articulate their case with the ongoing **16th Finance Commission**, seeking help apart from disaster mitigation funds.

Strategies



References

1. [The Hindu| Higher incidence of Forest Fires in Himachal Pradesh](#)
2. [Down To Earth| Himalayas on Fire](#)



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