

MoEFCC Report on Forest Fires

Why in news?

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Ministry of Environment, Forests and Climate Change (MoEFCC) and World Bank recently released a joint report on forest fires in India.

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What are the highlights?

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 - At least 60% of districts in India are affected by forest fires each year.
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 - The top 20 districts in terms of area affected by fire from 2003 to 2016 account for 48% of the total fire-affected area and they mostly fall in Central India.
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 - The 16 of the top 20 districts in terms of fire frequency are located mainly in the Northeast.
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 - Here, forest fires tend to be concentrated in a smaller area that is subject to repeated burning.
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 - The peak fire season is the most concentrated (shortest) in the Northeast and the Northern state of Bihar.
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 - Fires in other regions, particularly districts in Central and Southern India, are more expansive.
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 - Districts experiencing widespread and frequent forest fires include areas of dry and moist deciduous forest.
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 - These include the borderlands of Chhattisgarh, Maharashtra, and Telangana that are affected by fire on a nearly annual basis.
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 - Notably, between 2006 and 2015, forest fires were detected in just under half (281 of 614) of the protected areas in India.

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What are the proposed reasons?

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- In line with other parts of the world, people are the main driver of fires in India.

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- Forest fires are distributed close to people and infrastructure in India.

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- Also, India's monsoons are largely responsible for the seasonal nature of forest fires in the country.

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- Forest fires peak during the dry months of March or April before the arrival of the monsoon.

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- The fire season mainly occurs during the four-month period between February 15 and May 15.

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- Besides, the reduced contrast in land-sea temperatures had weakened the engine that drives the monsoon.

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- But it is not yet clear how the drying of the monsoon has affected the intensity or frequency of forest fires.

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What is the significance?

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- Forest fires contribute to global warming and hence climate change, by releasing carbon stored in trees, undergrowth and soil into the atmosphere.

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- Given this, the report gains significance with recent Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change's special report on global warming.

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- The findings are crucial for India's own pledge on creating additional carbon sink of 2.5 to 3 billion tonnes of Co₂-equivalent by 2030.

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- In the long run, climate shifts due to anthropogenic global warming may further alter India's forest landscape and fire regime.

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- Also, the MoEF issued national guidelines on Forest Fire Prevention and Management (FFPM) in 2000.

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- But these are no longer being implemented in true spirit.

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- The Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) has documented the shortage of dedicated funding for FFPM at the central and state levels.

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- The recent report is thus expected to be a key input in issuing a national policy on FFPM.

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Source: Indian Express

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