

Definition of forest

April 8, 2020

Why in news?

The Centre has clarified on the definition of forests.

More information:

- The freedom to define land, not already classified as forests by the Centre or state records, as forest has been the prerogative of the States since **1996** based on **SC judgment in Godavarman case**.
- In this case SC had **expanded the definition of forest to include** (a) lands that were already notified by the Centre as forests (b) lands that appear in government records as forests and c) those that fell in the dictionary definition of forest.
- The court had allowed the **States to evolve their own criteria and define tracts of land as forest**.
- SC had opined that an all-encompassing **definition of forest wasn't possible** for India because the country has **16 different kinds of forest** and a tract of grassland in one State might qualify in one region as forest but not in another.
- The **Forest Advisory Committee (FAC)** now has clarified that the States need not take the Centre's approval to define what constitutes unclassified land as forest.
- The **criteria finalized by a state need not be subject to approval by MoEF&CC**. However, once a state applied a criterion, it couldn't be reversed.

Need for clarification:

- Recent clarification by FAC on the definition of forest came in the backdrop of the **Uttarakhand government putting forth a set of criteria defining forest land** and asked the ministry for its opinion.

- But according to experts, **Indian definition** of forests **exaggerates forest cover** and inadvertently masks deforestation.
- India's definition of forests **doesn't provide an accurate picture of the extent of biodiversity** in rich natural forests.
- Often states claim that they are **helpless in preventing encroachment** because a patch of land in question hadn't been notified as forest. E.g. A recent instance was the felling of trees in **Mumbai's Aarey Colony**, which officially isn't classified as 'forest.'