

# Why Uttarakhand Forests Are Going Up in Smoke

*Seema Sharma*

It was a short-lived respite from forest fires for Uttarakhand, as blazes wreaked havoc on the hill state again this week, ravaging many hectares of forest land in both Garhwal and Kumaon. On Thursday alone, 50.88 hectares of forest land were gutted in 30 fire incidents in Garhwal, while in the Kumaon region 42 hectares were razed in 18 incidents. Environmentalists said that a long dry spell and lack of coordination by various agencies, especially the district administration, are responsible for the fires spiralling out of control. Since February this year, forest fires have affected around 4,292 hectares of forest land. After a week-long gap, when showers nipped blazes in the bud, the cases are again on the rise.

Fires are currently raging in Haldwani, Pithoragarh, Almora, Bageshwar, Corbett Tiger Reserve, and at four areas in Tons Forest Division, forest department officials said.

Divisional Forest Officer (Tons Forest Division) Sandeep Kumar, said, "The fires have been contained. The fire incidents took place because the forest area is carpeted with chir pine needles. There has been no rain for several days and the entire area is dry and vulnerable to fire."

Experts believe that presence of the timber mafia, ill-preparedness and lack of coordination by various agencies, and no rain is rendering forests in the state vulnerable to frequent fires.

Talking to *TOI*, environmentalist and historian Shekhar Pathak, said, "The forest department is deliberately maligning locals, claiming that they are the ones setting forests ablaze. The locals are the guardian of the forests and have sacrificed their lives to save them. It is only some people, who are connected with the timber mafia, who burn the forests."

He added, "The forest department remains ill-prepared and swings into action only after a fire has already occurred. The officials did not learn from their mistakes of not creating fire lines. They also did not save the broad-leaved trees, such as oak, which retain and recharge groundwater, leading chir pines to take over the forests."

Rajender Mahajan, principal chief conservator of forests (Uttarakhand), said that the earlier fires amassed huge proportions since the forest department lacked the funds and manpower to deal with so many cases. He added that the situation has improved now after more funds have been sanctioned to fight the fires and manpower increased.

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