

Odisha reports highest number of fire incidents in India as alerts go up

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Image used for representational purpose. (Express File Photo)

BHUBANESWAR: This has been a season of fire for Odisha's forests. As the summer heats up and threatens to be even more gruelling, the State has reported the highest number of fire incidents in the entire country, if the fire alerts issued by Forest Survey of India (FSI) are anything to go by. Generally, the fire season starts from February 15 but this year, the forest fire incidents started coming in from January itself. Beginning January 1, at least 22,882 fire alerts have been issued for Odisha by the two satellites which FSI uses to capture fire spots.

While MODIS generated 1,817 fire spots, SNPP issued 21,065 alerts. Maharashtra is next on the list with more than 17,000 fire alerts. In last seven days alone, the FSI generated over 7,300 fire alerts from the two satellites which have different resolution. Between February 15 and March 15, at least 14,796 alerts were issued by the FSI. A large number of the fire reports came in from non-forest areas, about 4,945 of them. Similarly, non-FSI fire incidence during the period stood at 698.

Going by the incidence rate, Rourkela Circle received the highest number of alerts - 3,144 - followed by 2,218 in Baripada and 2,178 in Berhampur circles. As the field offices grapple with the fire, the reasons for the alarming rise in blaze continue to be non-timber forest activities. Mahul flower collection remains a major reason. However, collection of kendu leaves, which constitutes a major part of tribal livelihood, is a huge cause for forest fires in eastern states like Odisha, Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh.

WORRYING ALARM

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Rourkela Circle**REASONS**

- Mahul flower collection remains a major reason
- Collection of kendu leaves is a huge cause for forest fires in eastern states like Odisha, Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh
- To get tender and new leaves, kendu leaf collectors set the forest bed on fire
- Poachers set fire to trap small animals

Kendu leaves are used for bidi making but traders prefer and pay handsomely for tender and new leaves which make for better quality of the hand-rolled smokes. To get these leaves, kendu leaf collectors set the forest bed on fire. When the plants re-appear and reach the height of a bush, the leaves are of the best quality. This encourages collectors to initiate fire which are a major worry for the forest field staff. Besides, poachers set fire to trap small animals which is another big reason for the wild fire.

While forest ground staff face a gigantic task of attending to fire in the gruelling heat, Forest Department of the State Government has mounted a massive IT and GIS-based system to generate alerts for the local staff attend to the fire.

The Forest IT and Geomatics Cell of Forest Department is a on 24x7 job. As FSI alerts are generated, the department has registered close to 2,659 mobile phones of the forest field staff through which the coordinates of the forest fire are sent. While FSI generates alerts only four times in a 24-hour cycle, the Geomatics Cell's servers are busy populating the alerts to field staff and generate response.

“The ground level staff have applications installed on their mobile phones which allow them to navigate to the spot, attend the fire and submit geo-spatial validation. In fact, they do not even need internet connection to carry out these operations,” says Chief Conservator of Forests (IT and GIS) PM Mallick.

Odisha is the first State to have developed and equipped its field staff with such IT features. While technology helps, ocular inspection continues to a significant method to detect and tackle the fire.

Wildlife and territorial divisions have annual plans to take on the crisis. In Keonjhar, DFO Santosh Joshi says at least seven squads have been created which follow the alerts and deploy watchers and local staff. The division has 45 blowers while it also takes help of the District Police to fight fire. In Anandpur Division, each range has in its possession about four to five such blowers. “We also encourage our staff to patrol in the night since temperature is lower and it is easier to travel and detect the spots,” says DFO Ajit Satpathy.

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