

The Times of India- 13- May-2023

NGT panel seeks penal action to save groundwater

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New Delhi: A joint committee of the Jal Shakti ministry has suggested in a report that Delhi should have a penal provision for contamination of groundwater due to faulty recharge.

The committee was formed on the direction of the National Green Tribunal (NGT) to look into installed rainwater harvesting systems.

A plea was filed before the NGT on deficiencies in rainwater harvesting systems that said it results in polluted water mixing with the groundwater. The matter initially pertained to 40 societies in Dwarka. The tribunal, while disposing of the matter, considered the need for a joint inspection of rainwater harvesting systems in all areas of Delhi to ensure proper functional design, depth of the borewell and use of gravel and coarse sand in filter media.

Heeding the NGT order, the ministry formed the committee headed by the chairperson of the Central Ground Water Board (CGWB). It inspected random sites in five states, including Delhi.

In Delhi, the committee inspected four sites and saw that rainwater harvesting pits were clean and working. The terraces of the building blocks were also found to be clean, the report said.

"Rainwater harvesting guidelines of the Delhi Jal Board (DJB) advise that 'only non-polluted rainwater from the rooftops and other catchment areas has to be diverted to the recharge structure through connection of (the) downpipe'. However, there is no penal provision for contamination of groundwater due to faulty recharge," said the report of the ministry, which was submitted to the NGT.

MINISTRY SAYS

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The committee said that in the other states it visited — Haryana, Rajasthan, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu — rainwater harvesting in urban areas has been made mandatory under building rules or other state acts or rules. "However, penal provisions for ground water contamination due to faulty design or due to lack of proper and timely maintenance are missing. Overall, rainwater harvesting systems were found as per design under the norms of the central/ state agencies at all the visited sites," the report said.

The report added that legal provisions should be introduced in state government rules, according to the Environment (Protection) Act, 1986, to tackle contamination of groundwater because of faulty rainwater harvesting designs or due to poor maintenance. Penal provisions may be applied as the last resort.

The other suggestions made by the committee are that all rainwater harvesting sites should be geo-tagged for better visibility for monitoring and as water quality may not be strictly checked, the water stored in harvesting structures may be used for non-potable purposes.