

## Reviving rivers biggest challenge: Neeri chief

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NAGPUR: Stepping into its 60th year, the city-based National Environmental Engineering Research Institute (Neeri) has decided to focus on rejuvenation of river and water bodies, air pollution, energy and climate change, and waste minimization.

At the foundation day ceremony on Saturday, Neeri director Rakesh Kumar said that river rejuvenation is the biggest challenge for Neeri and other institutes of Council of Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR). "Rivers across the country are highly polluted. Apart from rivers, perennial open surface water bodies are either drying up or are being encroached upon," Kumar said.

Speaking to TOI later, Kumar said that apart from major river projects like Godavari, Mithi and Chandrabhaga in Maharashtra, and Ganga, Yamuna, Narmada and Krishna across the country, the institute has also identified water bodies in Delhi, Jharkhand and Punjab. "A city like Delhi once had 600 water bodies but is now left with only 100. This is one of the reasons why the capitals gets flooded despite received little rainfall. There is no space left for immediate storage of rainwater," said Kumar, adding that the focus will also be on cleaning drains.

The institute is also planning to rope well-known water conservationists like Rajendra Singh for the projects. Cleaning a stretch of Nag river is also on the agenda.

While these projects are being planned, availability of funds is a major cause for concern. Director of Jawaharlal Nehru Aluminum Research Development and Design Centre (JNARDDC), Nagpur, Anupam Agnihotri, who was the chief guest of the foundation day programme, said that the government funds provided to CSIR institutions are static for the last few years. "The percentage of funds for the department of biotechnology and space technology has seen an increase but the same cannot be said for CSIR-run institutes," said Agnihotri.

He, however, added that the present government looks favourably disposed towards research and development. "This year, the parliamentary committee report was encouraging towards R&D," he said.

Stressing the need for an increase in R&D spending, Agnihotri said, "While India spends only 0.8 % of its gross domestic product on research and development, countries like China, South Korea and America spend 2.5%, 4.6% and 2.7 % respectively."

Another problem in the R&D sector is the fear of failure. "We discourage failure under the pressure of funds and other arrangements. Trying and experimenting is an integral part of research," Agnihotri added.

On its foundation day, the laboratories of Neeri were open for general public, including students. Eight hundred and fifty school students from 17 schools and few colleges and got a chance to interact with scientists from different divisions. A science model competition and exhibition was also organized for school students.