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Finland launches criminal probe into Google data center project

The US tech giant cleared hundreds of hectares of forest for planned facilities before completing environmental impact assessments

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Finnish police have launched a criminal investigation into suspected environmental violations at a planned Google data center site, where hundreds of hectares of forest were cleared before the completion of mandatory environmental impact assessments.



FILE PHOTO: A tree that has been chopped down. © Getty Images

The Oulu Police Department announced on Thursday that it is investigating suspected environmental damage at the site in Muhos, northern Finland, following complaints about the activities of Google's local subsidiary, Tuike Finland.

According to Finnish public broadcaster Yle, police have received five requests for an investigation, including one from the Finnish Supervisory Agency

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(LVV), which oversees environmental permits and assessments.

Investigators identified possible irregularities in drainage and water management at the construction site. The authorities are examining whether the work violated environmental legislation and caused damage to surrounding waterways.

Google has acknowledged that it cleared around 330 hectares of forest in Muhos and nearly 200 hectares at another planned data center site in Kajaani, despite environmental impact assessments for both projects remaining incomplete.



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Ecologist Mari Annala of the Finnish Association for Nature Conservation told The Guardian that Google cleared an estimated 250,000 trees in Muhos and another 150,000 in Otanmaki, bringing the total to 400,000.

Earlier this month, Finnish regulators ordered the company to suspend preparatory work at both locations, citing concerns about extensive logging, excavation, and drainage. The company confirmed on October 14 that it complied with the order.

The LVV has also warned that excavation and drainage at the Muhos site could release acidic, metal-contaminated water because of the area's black shale deposits. The regulator has demanded a more detailed water management plan by November 5.

Google's Finland country manager, Antti Jarvinen, apologized earlier this month for the extensive forest clearing but maintained that the company acted according to its understanding of Finnish law.

"I am extremely sorry that we are in this situation," he told Finnish public broadcaster Yle.

Jarvinen said Google worked with the authorities and experts but declined to identify which officials were informed about the clearing.

The controversy comes amid growing opposition to data center construction in the US, where people have protested against the enormous electricity and water demands, potential environmental damage, and rising utility costs of the facilities. In Virginia, hundreds of demonstrators recently demanded a halt to new projects. In Arizona, people have opposed planned facilities over concerns about water shortages and electricity costs.

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