

Forest officials, activists welcome ministry order on highways through eco-zones

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BENGALURU: The Central Government's new directive, to avoid national highways running through national parks, wildlife sanctuaries or corridors, comes as a big surprise and relief to the greens in Karnataka as the state has a host of national highway projects, including the ambitious Bharat Mala project, running through.

In its directive issued on May 29, the Ministry of Road Transport and Highways (MoRTH) has asked all agencies to opt for a detour or bypass at the planning stage itself to ensure compliance. The order will be applicable to all highway projects taken up by NHAI, NHIDCL, CPWD, PWD, Border Roads and other centrally sponsored schemes.

Under the Bharat Mala project itself, over 40 road corridors, estimated to cost Rs. 85,000 crore have been approved. Work on thirteen road projects covering a length of 1,435 km worth Rs 20,000 crore are underway. However, as part of this, widening and expansion of NH-63, 234, 169A, 275, 173, and other such sections, has been a cause for serious concern as it has involved diversion of forest lands, large scale felling of trees and fragmentation of habitat.

Activists say the state's ecology has already suffered with many highways being run through the ecologically fragile area of the Western Ghats, resulting in massive tree felling, fragmentation of elephant corridors and habitats. Forest officials too, are relieved by the directive. "This will give a new impetus to stall projects in the Western Ghats with concrete justifications for taking a detour. For Bandipur, there is no cause of worry

and for other projects, we will take a look and suggest measures for realignment,” said a senior forest officer.

In its order, the MoRTH says, “To have minimum impact of highways on the protected eco-sensitive area, the implementing agency should consider sparing these areas at the planning stage and wherever possible taking a bypass/detour even if it is longer.”

“With nearly 10 highways passing through protected areas, wildlife habitat is already impacted. With the government further taking up repairs and expansion, many critical wildlife habitat, elephant corridors have been affected. We hope this directive from the Centre is implemented fully and will not just remain on paper,” Manjunath, wildlife conservationist said.

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