



Centre to rate states on faster green clearances, environmentalists seek withdrawal of such move

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NEW DELHI: As part of its larger 'ease of doing business' goal, the Centre has decided to incentivise states through rating the respective environment impact assessment authorities on the basis of their efficiency in granting faster green clearance to projects.

The move is, however, severely criticized by the environmentalists who sought its immediate withdrawal, saying the government's decision will reduce environmental law compliance to a mere formality as the role of such body is to give nod after detailed scrutiny which takes time.

The environment ministry on Tuesday issued an office memorandum (OM) on its star-rating system for states' green authorities, saying the move is intended as a mode of recognition and encouragement as well as for promoting improvements where needed. It also recalled how its several initiatives in the past had cut down the average time taken in grant of Environment Clearance (EC) to 75 days as against the prescribed timeline of 105 days.

The ministry said the issue of ranking of states based on the time taken in according clearances was raised in a meeting, chaired by cabinet secretary in November last year, on action taken on 'ease of doing business', and it was decided to "incentivize the states through a star-rating system, based on the efficiency and timeliness in grant of EC".

Under the system, State Environment Impact Assessment Authorities (SEIAA) will be rated to encourage transparency, efficiency and accountability. "A perusal of the (rating) criteria, however, reveals that greater weightage is given for projects where due diligence is less," said environmental lawyer Ritwick Dutta who led the Legal Initiative for Forest and Environment (LIFE), a New Delhi-based think tank.

"This (rating system) process will ensure that SEIAA's aim will be to clear projects at the shortest possible time," said Dutta while flagging the irony as the real task of SEIAA is to undertake a 'detailed scrutiny' of the Environment Impact Assessment (EIA) report and all other relevant information including minutes of the public hearing which takes time.

"This order must be immediately withdrawn lest it makes a complete mockery of whatever sanctity the EIA process still has in the country. Environment ministry, SEIAA and other authorities exist to safeguard India's environmental security, and not give away the nation's natural lands to gain brownie points," said Manoj Misra, retired Indian Forest Service (IFS) officer and founder of Yamuna Jiye Abhiyaan.

"At a time when India has the world's worst air and water quality, this OM will, if applied, will reduce environmental law compliance to a mere formality. It needs immediate withdrawal," said Dutta. He noted that the ministry's decision will put the EC processes in a situation where "getting full marks is bad for the environment and people".

Referring to the rating criteria, the LIFE analyzed that if the SEIAA members conduct 'site visits' to ascertain the local conditions and ecology, marks are attributed for the same – and ironically the more the members visit the field to see the ecology, less marks they get.

"If SEIAA members undertake site visits in less than 10% of the proposals that come to them for appraisal, they will be given 1 mark. However, if they do site visits in more than 20%, SEIAA will get 0 marks... Similarly, in terms of time required for granting EC, 2 marks will be given if the approval is granted in less than 80 days and 0 mark will be given if approval is granted in more than 120 days... The aim is clear. SEIAA members should sit in the confines of conference rooms and make decisions and earn high marks," said Dutta.

Source: <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/centre-to-rate-states-on-faster-green-clearances-environmentalists-seek-withdrawal-of-such-move/articleshow/88999153.cms>