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Kerala: DFOs recommend forest clearance for plan

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THIRUVANANTHAPURAM: The proposed twin tunnel project to establish direct connectivity between Kozhikode and Wayanad has been recommended for forest clearance by the divisional forest officers of South Wayanad and Kozhikode divisions, as per the documents uploaded on PARIVESH portal of MoEF&CC.

As per the South Wayanad DFO's recommendation note, the proposal for forest clearance has been recommended considering the merits and minimal disturbance to forest and wildlife. It comes with recommendations that compensatory afforestation shall be provided by PWD for each 1ha diversion and that PWD shall bear the cost for planting 1,000 seedlings. Besides, it is also recommended that the revenue from sale of rocks obtained from tunneling through the forest areas of South Wayanad may

be used for forest and wildlife conservation.

The South Wayanad DFO's recommendation note also flags some concerns. It says that the landslide-prone area of Puthumala is very close to the proposed area, where the 2018 floods took the lives of many people and caused a lot of damage.

"Therefore the possibility of future landslides due to the implementation of this project cannot be ruled out," reads the recommendation note. It also says that the abundance of wild fauna invites problems like animals getting trapped in the tunnel once it is constructed. "This necessitates a rescue plan for the trapped animals and the service of a rapid response team (RRT) at the cost of the user agency," says the recommendation note.

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Regarding disturbance to the forest area due to the project, South Wayanad DFO says in the note that the chances of disturbance due to an underground tunnel are less compared to an overground road. “The fragmentation of forests that can happen due to a four-lane over surface road is prevented by the underground tunnel road project and it can act as a lifeline for evacuating people from Wayanad in case of any calamity in future, because over surface ghat roads are prone to congestion and traffic halts due to landslides,” says the report.

Kozhikode DFO has recommended forest clearance on the condition that 10% of the revenue generated from toll receipts from Kozhikode side shall be deposited with the forest development agency for the functioning of RRT in the area to deal with man-animal conflict, including rescue of animals that can get trapped in the tunnel in future. Besides, sale receipts from stones and boulders shall be used for forest and wildlife conservation.

Kozhikode DFO’s recommendation also includes some pertinent observations. Various rivers originate from these areas. The site proposed is part of hill ranges which are vulnerable to landslides, the report notes. The site inspection report by Kozhikode DFO notes that a major bridge will be constructed across Iruvanjippuzha and an additional temporary road has been demanded by PWD for construction purposes. Around 104 trees have to be cut and removed, says the site inspection report. The site inspection report by South Wayanad DFO also says that the area proposed for diversion is a part of the Nilgiris biosphere reserve and that the gradients are steep on the outer portion of the hillock and is prone to landslides.

N Badusha, president, Wayanad Prakruthi Samrakshana Samithi said that DFOs have recommended for forest clearance under coercion. “They have acted under pressure. It goes against the spirit of forest and wildlife conservation. The contention about minimal damage is wrong. The proposed site is crucial to the ecology and climate of Wayanad and any intervention could lead to an adverse impact. There is no study on how this is going to affect the water bodies,” said Badusha.