

To kickstart the economy, India's environment ministry is clearing projects in 10 minutes

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Even as India is just coming out of a nationwide lockdown due to the novel coronavirus, the environment ministry is considering large scale mining, infrastructure and industrial projects for environment, forest and wildlife clearances by hosting video meetings of its expert panels. This is despite the expert panels admitting that time available for considering some of these projects is "very less" and in some cases just about 10 minutes per project.

A nod from the expert panels, the National Board for Wildlife (NBWL), the Forest Advisory Committee (FAC), and 10 Expert Appraisal Committees (EAC), is necessary for projects to get green clearances from the central government's ministry of environment, forest and climate change (MoEFCC). Once a project is recommended or rejected green clearance by these panels, the final decision is taken by the environment ministry but their decisions are rarely overturned.

Earlier, meetings of such panels were cancelled after the nationwide lockdown came into effect on March 25. But they have now been scheduled to take place in April and May over videoconferencing. According to meeting agendas posted on the environment ministry's website, 191 projects are to be considered for clearances.

In some meetings that have already taken place, these expert panels have cleared several important projects. For instance, in the meeting of EAC on infrastructure on April 22-24, the project related to the construction of India's new parliament was recommended environment clearance.

The environment ministry has said the meetings are being held to help clear proposals for seamless economic growth.

However, environmentalists and experts have criticised the urgency shown by the MoEFCC to clear projects at a time when affected people cannot send evidence or representations, and expert panellists cannot do field visits due to the lockdown. The laws governing green clearances also have no provision to allow video conferencing.

Race against time

The maximum number of projects (145) will be considered by the 10 EACs that evaluate projects for granting environment clearance under the Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) Notification, 2006.

The projects on the agenda in videoconference meetings over April and May include a three-fold expansion of the Numaligarh oil refinery in Assam. The supreme court in Jan.

2019 had ordered its boundary wall to be demolished as it was blocking an elephant corridor.

Other projects on the agenda of the expert panels include seaplane airports at the Brahmaputra riverfront in Guwahati, at the Statue of Unity and Shatrunjay dam in Gujarat. The EAC on infrastructure during its meeting on April 22-24 cleared Terms of Reference (ToR) for these three projects related to seaplane airports. ToRs are guidelines for conducting environmental studies of projects after which the project is considered for clearance by the committee.

Also on the agenda are projects related to the new building of India's parliament, new offices and residential quarters of the ministry of defence in Delhi, a 2,400-megawatt coal power plant at Talabira, Odisha, where adivasis (tribal people) have opposed the expansion of coal mines, diamond mines in Panna, Madhya Pradesh for producing 100,000 carats of diamonds and uranium mining in a tiger reserve in Telangana.

The EAC meetings usually last through the day, and the affected people from large projects send additional documentation and evidence. But the National Informatics Center, a government agency that is coordinating the videoconferencing, has allotted only two hours for each meeting.

As a result, the EACs, like the one on industrial projects, have allotted just 10 minutes to each project and crammed 47 projects over three sittings. Another EAC on coal mining remarked in its agenda that the time given to it was "very less."

The EACs would not be able to carry out site visits to verify the information presented to it, and its decisions would depend entirely on documentation and reports provided by the project developer, said Leo Saldanha, coordinator at the Environment Support Group in Bengaluru. "About 99% of such reports are known to be fraudulent," Saldanha said.

The EACs may not have enough documentation too.

For example, the EAC on coal mining normally requires five kinds of colour-coded maps on A3 size sheets, which show forests, farms, rivers, canals, and such features near the mines, so that it can recommend appropriate safety measures.

But the EAC has now asked for just a few soft copies: one PowerPoint presentation and an online map file showing only the boundaries of the project.

People affected by projects, who don't have ready access to the internet would be unable to send representations or documents to the EACs. "In the past, these submissions have been crucial for the EACs to ask for critical studies and ensure safeguards even if a project is approved," said Kanchi Kohli, a senior researcher at the Centre for Policy Research in New Delhi.

“Very few people will now be able to send in substantial and evidence-based submissions,” she said.

No provision for video conferences

On April 7, India’s environment minister Prakash Javadekar tweeted that he chaired the meeting of the standing committee of the National Board on Wildlife, which cleared 36 projects in protected wildlife areas, including in the Western Ghats.

But the Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972, under which the Board functions, does not provide for meetings over video. In fact, none of the laws governing environment clearances has provisions for video conferencing, and some like the EIA Notification even make hard copies of project reports and maps mandatory.

“The rules only say that the committee shall meet, but there is no specific exemption that you need not meet or they can take decisions by video,” Biswajit Mohanty of the Wildlife Society of Odisha said.

On April 23, the FAC met over video conferencing to consider 10 projects that aim to come up over 10,000 hectares of forests, including exploration for uranium mining in the Amrabad Tiger Reserve in Telangana, and dams in the Dibang Valley in Assam. The Forest (Conservation) Act, 1980, too does not say if decisions can be taken in videoconferencing.

Such projects require detailed deliberations and often face-to-face interactions with affected people and scientists, said Nandini Velho, an independent researcher who has written to the ministry about the rich biodiversity at the Dibang Valley project sites. “Maybe we cannot decide what the government wants to do politically, but at least it can continue to have rigour in the scrutiny of projects.”

The environment ministry has not responded to a questionnaire sent by Mongabay-India on April 23. On Twitter, it has said that the meetings are being held to help “clear proposals” for “seamless economic growth.”

But expert panel decisions are irreversible and it was better to delay them than to rush through, Saldanha pointed out. “The Union Commerce Ministry is not rushing decisions through without holding consultations with industries. So, what’s the hurry for the environment ministry?” he questioned.

There is perhaps a motive to clearing projects during a health emergency, Mohanty said. “People are busy, and not in a position to file objections.”

Source: <https://qz.com/india/1851634/india-fast-tracks-green-clearance-to-spur-coronavirus-hit-economy/>