

Green clearance norms for mining ops may be relaxed

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New Delhi: *Govt keen on ensuring fuel security doesn't come in way of growth revival plans*

Concerned that fuel scarcity could hamper plans to revive economic growth, the government is planning to further relax green clearance norms for mining projects. Coal mining operations, which are stuck due to delays in forest clearance, may now get approvals on fast-track basis from the environment ministry even if less than 50% of the population of affected villages give their nod for the project.

A proposal in this regard has been favoured by the Cabinet Secretariat and the PMO, both of which are directly monitoring progress on approvals for infrastructure projects, source privy to the development told FE. "This will help increase coal production in the country. Often, mining projects are delayed due to time taken in getting EC and FC clearances," said an official of Coal India, the country's largest coal producer.

As per the proposal, the need for a 50% quorum for Gram Sabha meetings would be relaxed and the meeting would be convened even if the attendance is less than that.

The Gram Sabha meeting is held to obtain a no-objection certificate from district authorities to divert forest land for the project concerned, to meet the conditions of Forests Rights Act (FRA). The Gram Sabha nod is a key condition before FC clearance could be processed by the environment ministry. "Many a times, the Gram Sabha meeting is not able to transact any business even after being convened due to lack of quorum. The condition of a 50% quorum for the Gram Sabha should be relaxed," said a note of the cabinet secretariat.

The environment ministry, which is responsible for giving these clearances, is yet to take a call on the matter and has formed a committee under Planning Commission member K Kasturirangan to look into it.

The proposal comes close on the heels of a similar easing of norms for environment clearance to coal sector projects. The ministry of environment & forest recently notified new guidelines for EC clearance where companies may not be required to go for the tedious public hearing process if they want to expand the capacity of existing coal mines by 25%.

The proposed changes also counter the revised land acquisition Bill that seeks consent of 80% project-affected persons for acquisition of land for private projects and 70% consent for public-private partnership (PPP) projects. No consent in the draft Land Acquisition Bill is required for infrastructure projects fully owned by the government.

PM Manmohan Singh, at the recent meeting of the National Development Council (NDC), had raised the issue of fuel shortage affecting power plants.

"I am requesting the Planning Commission to make a quick review of the situation and submit a report to me within three weeks. I would request all CMs to write to the deputy chairman of the Planning Commission, giving details of plants, which they feel are adversely affected," he said.

Over 60,000 MW of power projects are awaiting fuel linkages. Though CIL has been asked to sign fuel supply agreements with power projects coming up by March 2015, it would need to import coal to meet the shortages. Coal import is expected to jump to over 200 million tonne by the end of 12th Plan, forcing the government to look for ways of augmenting domestic coal production on a fast-track basis.

The Cabinet secretariat note also said that apart from relaxing quorum requirement for Gram Sabha meetings, the process for further clearances should be streamlined. "Once FC has been granted for a piece of land after observing all formalities, renewal should be limited to ascertain whether all conditions imposed at the time of grant of final FC are being followed or not," the note added. The environment ministry is waiting for clarity to take a decision on the matter. "The Kasturirangan panel has not agreed on changes in FC clearance process and the matter is stuck," said an MoEF official.