

Ramesh for realistic 'green' scrutiny for infra projects

Devjyot Ghoshal / Sunderbans January 18, 2010, 0:42 IST

The implementation of large industrial and infrastructure projects in the country is likely to become more fractious with the Ministry for Environment and Forests (MoEF) pushing for severe scrutiny of proposed undertakings that infringe forested areas.



“There is an unrealistically low rate of rejection (of projects by MoEF). Over 95 per cent of projects that come to us for environment clearances get approved, and over 90 per cent of forest clearances get approved. I want to reverse this trend,” Environment and Forests Minister Jairam Ramesh told Business Standard.

The minister, who recently visited the Sunderbans, said that “no compromises would be made on certain basics” and projects would have to be shifted elsewhere if they posed a threat to forests.

The move could especially hit the mining industry, as much of India’s resources are locked in areas under forest cover, and infrastructure projects such as highways and railway expansion.

For instance, the ministry has shot down a proposal for open cast mining by Adani Power in the jungles adjoining the Tadoba Andhari Tiger Reserve in Maharashtra, apart from rejecting five projects for mining in the Hansdeo region of Chhattisgarh.

Moreover, the ministry has also been averse to the construction of the Navi Mumbai international airport which could destroy over 400 acres of mangroves and a number of NHAI (National Highways Authority of India) projects in Madhya Pradesh have been disapproved as they would cut through crucial animal corridors connecting national parks.

“There is huge pressure on me to clear these projects but a point has been reached where we have to take a tough stand. I know that there will be a backlash (from the industry) but this will have to be done,” Ramesh said.

However, MoEF has started an exercise with the coal ministry to identify “go” and “no-go” areas for the major mining regions of the country.

“The survey for the North Karanpura coal field in Jharkhand have been completed. Of the 59 mines in question, work can be undertaken in 38 mines and 21 mines have been marked as ‘no-go’ areas. Similar exercises will be undertaken for all major coal fields and will be based on satellite data that provides us with broad indicators,” Ramesh said.

The study for seven major coal fields, including Talcher and Ranigunj, is likely to be taken up over the next two months.

Ministry awaits Orissa clearance

The Ministry for Environment and Forests (MoEF) is still awaiting an assessment from the Orissa government before working towards a final clearance for Vedanta’s bauxite mining project in that state. Although the MoEF had given an in-principal approval for the project in Niyamgiri Hills of Orissa, since the facility involves forest and non-forest land, construction on the former is not authorised until the final approval is procured, Union minister for Environment and Forest, Jairam Ramesh said.

Stipulations under the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006 also have to be met before the clearances are granted. “I had written to the Orissa government a month back, asking the chief conservator of forests to look into the matter. They must respond to this immediately,” Ramesh said.