

NATIONAL

# Government to fast-track green nod

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## MoEF issues fresh guidelines to accelerate environmental appraisal of projects



The Ministry of Environment and Forests (MoEF) wants to expedite the environment appraisal of industrial projects. These appraisals, as per norms, are conducted by independent panels of experts that have representatives from the government as well as from outside, trained in matters of ecology, wildlife and habitat preservation.

The Expert Appraisal Committees (EACs) opine on whether a proposed project beyond a certain size ought to be commissioned and recommend ways to mitigate the potential environmental impact. Their advice is critical to the MoEF's eventual decision to either clear or red flag a project.

However, a November 11 letter from the Ministry's Environment Impact Assessment division, that coordinates EAC meetings, issued fresh guidelines to accelerate the appraisal process.

### **'Avoid delays'**

"During the review meetings held for streamlining the Environmental Clearances (EC) process, it has come to notice that the grant of EC is delayed due to various reasons which could be avoided... Member Secretaries of the various sectors may strictly adhere to the following guidelines to avoid unnecessary delay while granting ECs," the letter said.

The recommendations include ensuring that EAC meetings are held at least once in 15 days. All proposals that were placed for approval 10 days before a meeting ought to be considered (It is 15 days now).

"The queries or issues, which the division may have, should be raised during the EAC meeting only. Member Secretary (MS) ought to ensure that the relevant queries of the division are also pointed out at the time of EAC meetings itself so as to avoid occasion for such queries before and after examination by Expert Appraisal Committee (EAC)," the missive notes.

There are separate EAC committees for industrial projects, coal mining, non-coal mining, river and hydroelectric projects, each with its own independent chairperson and committee members. However, several members have full-time jobs independent of their commitments to EAC meetings.

Environmental law specialist and researcher at the Centre for Policy Research, Kanchi Kohli said it was legally contentious if an office order could curtail the role of the EAC that requires detailed scrutiny of applications seeking environmental clearance.

"What is even more concerning is the Environment Ministry's approach to reading down its own mandate for environment protection. Accelerated approvals definitely don't allow for good environmental decisions and do not necessitate that projects will be up and running to support an already sluggish economy. Our current approval rates are close to 100%, and yet there is an economic slowdown," she told *The Hindu*.

Environment minister Prakash Javadekar has said he's committed to bringing down the time required for clearance down to less than 100 days.

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