

PRESS RELEASE: FOREST & ENVIRONMENTAL CLEARANCES DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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A group of 291 conservation scientists and allied professionals, including 12 former members of the Standing Committee of the National Board for Wildlife (NBWL), the highest advisory body on wildlife that is chaired by the Prime Minister of India, have expressed their serious concerns about the lack of due diligence for environmental and forest clearances, especially during the pandemic-related restrictions and hardships.

The Ministry of Environment, Forest & Climate Change (MoEF&CC) has adapted to the current travel and physical distancing restrictions with a move to online platforms, such as video conferences, for decision making. The letter stated that such communication platforms, used in its present form, are inadequate and do not pay due diligence to forest and environmental clearances.

“The MoEF&CC is under Orders of the Supreme Court to strictly comply with the Lafarge Judgment Guidelines to tighten the clearance process. Shockingly, key Guidelines are being ignored including the failure to appoint a National Regulator for appraising projects. The MoEF&CC appears to be abdicating its constitutional obligation of ensuring environmental protection. Granting fast-track clearances has now become the rule,” said Praveen Bhargav from Wildlife First and a former member of the NBWL.

Specifically, the letter referenced the decisions and clearances given at the 57th meeting of the Standing Committee of the National Board for Wild Life (NBWL) on the 7th of April 2020 that were related to the 31 proposals affecting 15 tiger reserves, sanctuaries, notified Eco-sensitive zones, deemed Eco-sensitive zones and designated wildlife corridors.

The authors presented several concerns with regards to the project evaluations not being done rigorously to the method of functioning by statutory bodies. They state that video calls were not an efficient mode of communication to assess the environmental, livelihood and biodiversity impacts of projects. Signatories pointed

out that under normal circumstances, Expert Appraisal Committee (EAC) meetings would last an entire day. In comparison, meetings during the recent lockdown have lasted only 2 hours, with only 10 minutes to appraise each project.

Due to the reliance on only digital documents uploaded by project developers on the Parivesh single window clearance portal leads to “*fait accompli* situations”, and gravely compromises the appraisals by the committees during the lockdown. The signatories stated that appraisals and assessments for clearance are being reduced to an “empty formality” lacking the credibility and rigour of its purpose.

“Reliance on only digital documents uploaded by project developers compromises the appraisals by the committees. Here, crucial safeguards and guidelines, such as site visits, public hearings, inputs from relevant experts and people on the ground are also difficult to implement, with travel and other restrictions. These decisions have serious and far reaching consequences, and need to be informed, knowledge-based -- and the lack of due diligence is worrying. The mandate of the Forest Advisory Committee (FAC), NBWL and EAC is to protect our forests and wildlife, safeguard the environment - such decisions have irreversible implications for our last remaining refugias of wildlife,” said Prerna Bindra, author, conservationist and former member of the NBWL.

The letter was signed by a group of conservation scientists and allied professionals including pioneering voices such as Dr. M.K. Ranjitsinh, Ph.D., former Secretary of the MoEF&CC who was part of multiple NBWL and other committees, along with many professionals from within the country and overseas. They stated that it was ironic they were raising their concerns in the midst of a pandemic. “I thought this pandemic will teach us a lesson that playing with nature can result in catastrophic consequences to humankind but sadly the MoEF&CC has used this lockdown opportunity to bulldoze major forest and environmental clearances,” said Dr. Asad Rahmani, Ph.D., former Director of the Bombay Natural History Society.

The list of signatories included emerging conservation professionals, former members of the FAC and environmental photojournalists and film-makers that have taken India’s wildlife and forest stories to regional, national and international audiences. The voices of seasoned wildlife experts such as Dr. AJT Johnshingh,

Ph.D., and Dr. Divyabhanusinh Chavda, D. Litt., were joined by researchers and professionals from Assam, Nagaland, Arunachal Pradesh, Goa and many other states from across the country. The list also includes Padma Shri awardee and lawyer Norma Alvares from the Goa Foundation and noted film-maker and Green Oscar winner Mike Pandey. Academics from India's premier institutions such as the Indian Institute of Science, National Centre for Biological Sciences, Wildlife Institute of India, Indian Institute of Science Education and Research, Indian Institute of Technology were signatories. The letter was also signed by Indian academics from Columbia University, Yale University, University of Michigan, and University of Cambridge, among others.

Given the current circumstances and uncertain future, the signatories called for fresh appraisals and to hold in abeyance forest and environmental clearance decisions and postpone further meetings till all pandemic-related travel and meeting restrictions are completely lifted across India. "It is inexcusable that our government continues to pursue a development model which depends on destroying nature, especially when there is sufficient evidence of more sustainable options that will also generate significant employment and an equitable and inclusive economic future for us citizens," said Dr. Ravi Chellam, Ph.D., wildlife biologist and CEO of Metastring Foundation. They concluded their submission by urging the MoEF&CC to carry out its intended mandate of protection of India's forests, wildlife and natural heritage and not fast-track the clearance of projects.

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