

Wildlife clearance for projects only after green nod, says panel

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NEW DELHI: The standing committee of the national board for wildlife has decided that it will consider proposals for wildlife clearance for projects only after they have received forest approvals, a new protocol that officials said were aimed at avoiding conflicting decisions and to enable higher scrutiny of projects in eco-sensitive zones.

Some experts, however, warned that granting forest clearance before wildlife clearance could create a fait accompli situation, as forest clearance itself is a major screening step in eco-sensitive zones.

In a letter dated March 18, the wildlife division of the Union environment ministry told all states and Union territories that "proposals requiring recommendations/approvals of the SCNBWL (Standing Committee of the National Board for Wildlife) and forest clearance under Van (Sanrakshan Evam Samvardhan) Adhiniyam, 1980 shall be placed for consideration on

THE POLICY SHIFT CAME AFTER THE STANDING PANEL RECENTLY CONSIDERED A PROJECT IN BUFFER ZONE OF RAJAJI TIGER RESERVE

the SCNBWL, only after receipt of forest clearance."

Previously, forest and wildlife clearances for infrastructure projects coming up in forest areas or around wildlife sanctuaries were often considered in parallel. But senior officials said the new policy will avoid contradictory rulings by having higher scrutiny at the forest clearance level first. "Both the process of forest clearance and wildlife clearances can go parallel but decision on wildlife clearances in those cases which involves forest clearance will be taken later, for a better-informed decision," an official said, asking not to be named.

Experts said the step, while

welcome, could have unintended consequences. "This is a welcome step, as it could provide the Wildlife Board with valuable official information...such as site inspection reports and wildlife affected, which are supposed to be officially documented in the process of forest clearance," said Debadityo Sinha from Vidhi Centre for Legal Policy. But, he cautioned that "ensuring that the grant of forest clearance does not become a means to endorse wildlife clearance might pose a challenge, as both fall under separate legislation."

The policy shift came after the standing committee recently considered a road project in the buffer zone of Rajaji Tiger Reserve in Uttarakhand. Despite recommendations from state wildlife authorities, some members objected that the project lacked prior forest clearance as required under a previous Supreme Court order.

Officials say the new policy standardises processes and allows wildlife board to make better decisions aided by prior forest clearance assessments.