

CENTRE WAIVES GREEN CLEARANCE FOR ONSHORE AND OFFSHORE OIL AND GAS EXPLORATION

Relevant for: Environment | Topic: Environmental Conservation, Sustainable Development, and EIA

A technician opens a pressure gas valve inside the Oil and Natural Gas Corporation gathering station on the outskirts of Ahmedabad. File | Photo Credit: [Reuters](#)

The Environment Ministry has exempted oil and gas firms, looking to conduct exploratory drilling, from seeking an environmental clearance. The clearance is for both on-shore and offshore drilling explorations and the process is an ecologically-intensive exercise that involves digging multiple wells and conducting seismic surveys offshore.

Until today, even exploratory surveys have merited the highest level of environmental scrutiny — called category ‘A’ — that required project proponents to prepare an environment impact assessment (EIA) plan, have it scrutinised by a Centrally constituted committee of experts and subject the proposal to a public hearing involving the local residents of the proposed project site. While public hearings, even for category A projects are frequently exempted if they are offshore, the new amendments demote exploratory projects to the category of ‘B2’. This means it will be conducted by the States concerned and will not require an EIA. The move is part of a larger process of ‘decentralisation’ by the Centre in that it seeks to farm more regulatory actions to State and local units. Environmentalists aver that this can mean lax oversight.

Govt. launches fifth round of bidding for hydrocarbon exploration

Developing an offshore or onshore drilling site as a hydrocarbon block will however continue to merit a “category A” treatment, the Ministry notification, made public on January 18, clarifies.

In 2019, the ONGC and the [Vedanta group were granted permission](#) to conduct exploratory oil surveys in Tamil Nadu and Puducherry and this had [led to protests](#) led by the Opposition DMK and the Congress, which argue that the exploratory drilling will lead to destruction of agricultural fields in the Cauvery delta.

[Neduvasal controversy: the story in pictures](#)

Chennai-based environment activist Nityanand Jayaraman has argued that offshore drilling operations can possibly effect fish, lead to a build-up of heavy water contaminants, disorient whales and sea life that rely on sonar for navigation and exacerbate the risk of oil spills.

“This is part of a continuing trend by the larger lack of oversight by the Environment Ministry,” said Debi Goenka, of the Conservation Action Trust and who deals with coastal ecology issues.

The government in 2019 relaxed rules that incentivises companies conducting oil exploration surveys in less-explored oil fields to keep a greater share of revenue if they chance upon viable hydrocarbon blocks. This has led to a spurt in interest in oil and gas exploration with the Cauvery basin registering a spurt in activity.

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