

India's first river interlinking project caught in U.P.-M.P. tussle

Disagreements over water-sharing and difficulty in acquiring non-forest land impede the Rs. 18,000-crore Ken- Betwa river interlink project.

The project, which involves deforesting a portion of the Panna Tiger Reserve in Madhya Pradesh, was accorded clearance by the National Wildlife Board on the condition that the land lost would be made good by acquiring contiguous, revenue land. This is to ensure that wildlife corridors in the region aren't hit. "The M.P. government has said that they are facing major difficulties over this," said a senior person in the Water Ministry involved with the project.

Unlikely this year

Another hurdle is a dispute over how Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh — the two beneficiaries — will share water in the Rabi season.

These "major" issues made it quite unlikely that the project will get under way this year. A person familiar with the deliberations told *The Hindu*, "New points of differences between the two States are constantly being raked up... there are still many things to be ironed out before the project can be sent for the [Union] Cabinet's approval."

Conceived as a two-part project, this is India's first river interlinking project. It is perceived as a model plan for similar interstate river transfer missions.

Phase 1 involves building a 77 m-tall and a 2 km-wide dam, the Dhaudhan dam, and a 230 km canal to transfer extra water from the Ken river for irrigating 3.64 lakh hectares in the Bundelkhand region of Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh.

Originally, this phase envisaged irrigating 6,35,661 ha annually (3,69,881 ha in M.P. and 2,65,780 ha in U.P.). In addition, the project was to provide 49 million cubic metres (MCM) of water for en route drinking water supply.

'No longer valid'

While there's a 2005 agreement between Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh on how water would be shared, Madhya Pradesh said last year that these assumptions were no longer valid and the only way to meet increased water requirements would be to include certain local water management projects — the Kotha barrage, Lower Orr and Bina complex that were envisaged in the second phase of the project — in the first phase.

In theory, this could mean a completely fresh environmental appraisal. The Central Water Commission is yet to officially take a call, though government sources say the Centre is agreeable to the change. However, new demands by Madhya Pradesh for more water during the Rabi season are yet to be negotiated.

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