

DECISION ON HYDROPOWER PROJECT IN ARUNACHAL PRADESH DEFERRED

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

The Forest Advisory Committee, the apex body of the Environment Ministry tasked with deciding whether forest land can be diverted for industrial projects, has once again deferred its decision on a controversial hydropower project in Arunachal Pradesh.

The 3097 MW Etalin Hydropower project, in the State's Dibang Valley, has been delayed for over six years. This is because it required diverting 1165 hectares of forest in a region of rich biodiversity.

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In 2015, the FAC had ruled that the Environment Impact Assessment commissioned by the power company had not properly accounted for the environmental impact of the project. It recommended that an "internationally credible" institute conduct studies over multiple seasons to record the region's ecological constitution. It had also recommended that the National Tiger Conservation Authority be consulted, because tigers had been sighted in the region. In 2019, the FAC reviewed the progress of the environment appraisal and said neither of its recommendations had been fully complied with, though a wildlife assessment was done by the Wildlife Institute of India, Dehradun. This is an autonomous institute funded by the Environment Ministry.

An FAC subcommittee conducted a site-visit in February this year. The objective of this visit was to determine if the land required for the project could be reduced and whether it was necessary to fell 30,2538 trees — as initially proposed — for the project.

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The committee recommended that 15 hectares of forest land could be salvaged and a further 423 hectares would be handed over to the State forest department after commissioning the project. Also, 27,8038 trees would have to be felled. With these and a few other conditions, the FAC subcommittee approved the project.

In a meeting on April 23, the FAC — at least two of whose members were part of the subcommittee that did the site-visit — decided that it would be "prudent" to get an input from the Ministry of Power. The reasoning, according to the minutes of the meeting, was that since 2015 the government may have changed its policy on hydropower projects. Several hydropower projects have undergone a rethink in different parts of the country because of the costs, ecological damage and alternatives in the form of wind and solar energy.

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