STATES TO GET AIR POLLUTION FUNDS BASED ON MEETING 'PERFORMANCE TARGETS'

Relevant for: Environment | Topic: Environmental Pollution - Air, Water, Soil & E-waste

Union Minister of Environment, Forest and Climate Change Prakash Javadekar. File | Photo Credit: MV

The Central government's decision to release only half of its budgetary allotment for combating air pollution was because of its plan to link the money disbursed to the States achieving certain 'performance targets'.

In February, Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman said, "In large cities having population above one million, polluted air is a matter of concern... Allocation for this purpose is 4,400 crore for 2020-2021 and parameters for the incentives would be notified by the Ministry of Environment, Forests and Climate change."

On Monday, however, the Centre, based on the recommendations of the 15th Finance Commission, released exactly half — 2200 crore—to 15 States. The States, in turn, have to release money to local municipal bodies in 42 cities to take steps to monitor and mitigate air pollution.

A senior official in the Environment Ministry, who declined to be identified, said the funds were being disbursed by the Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs and the Environment Ministry's role was to set the performance parameters. These would be decided by the month-end. "The second instalment would be released in January 2021 against performance-based outcomes in terms of year-on-year improvement in air quality."

In July, officials of the Environment Ministry, as well as the steering committee of the National Clean Air Programme (NCAP), deliberated on the steps to be taken on the disbursal of funds, a person who was a part of the meeting told The Hindu. "Subsequently, it was decided that the funds would be given based on certain performance targets being met."

The NCAP envisages 102 of India's most polluted cities reducing air pollution by 20-30% by 2024 with a reference year of 2017. The States, where these cities are located, have submitted a road map on how they would go about this reduction. The first step, according to Environment Ministry officials, would be to improve the measurement. Unlike Delhi, which has nearly 37 automatic air quality monitors that continuously measure particulate matter, many cities have barely a handful.

Sachidanand Tripathi, Professor, Indian Institute of Technology, Kanpur, and Coordinator, NCAP, told The Hindu, "In several cities, we don't know the source apportionment, or how much of a city's pollution is from neighbouring regions. I believe improving monitoring and having trained personnel at the municipal body-level will be an important part of how these funds are used."

Maharasthra and Uttar Pradesh were the recipients of the largest tranches—of 396 crore and 357 crore respectively.

Non-attainment cities are those which were found to be consistently violating the National Ambient Air Quality Standards (NAAQS) from 2011-2015.

Minister of State for Environment Babul Supriyo told Parliament in September that 224.74 crores had been released to State pollution control boards for components sanctioned under the NCAP during 2019-20. Sixty percent of funds, i.e. 172.86 crore, had been released to 90 cities, including 7 cities of the Northeast and the remaining had been disbursed to 43 cities.

The activities that the money would be spent would include installing and commissioning continuous ambient air quality monitoring systems, creating green buffer zone along the roads, mechanical street sweepers, mobile enforcement units, water sprinklers, public awareness and capacity-building activities.

At the State-level, the NCAP envisages a steering committee headed by the Chief Secretary, a monitoring committee headed by principal secretary (environment) and an implementation committee headed by either district magistrate or commissioner of the municipal corporation.

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