

GROUNDWATER EXTRACTION NORMS TIGHTENED

Relevant for: Geography | Topic: Distribution of key natural resources - Water Resources incl. Rivers & related issues in world & India

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The government has made it harder for industries to extract groundwater and asked the States to “review” policies that allow subsidised and free electricity to farmers as well bring in a “suitable water pricing policy” to reduce reliance on groundwater extraction.

The bulk of groundwater extraction today is from the agriculture sector though there is considerable uncertainty on the exact numbers.

Currently, industries and establishments must get a No Objection Certificate (NOC) from the Central Groundwater Authority as part of building permission.

According to the new rules made public late Friday, “no new major industries” would be given NOCs in over-exploited assessment blocks. Based on groundwater levels, areas across the country are split into three categories: Over-exploited, Critical and Semi critical. The first refers to groundwater being extracted more than what’s recharged, critical—where the groundwater taken out is 90-100% of what's recharged—and semi-critical where extraction rate is 70%-90%.

Places with lower extraction rates are deemed ‘safe’ blocks. Of the Central Groundwater Board’s, 6,584 groundwater assessment units across the country, 1034 are over-exploited, 253 are critical and 681 are semi-critical.

“Expansion of the existing industries involving increase in quantum of groundwater abstraction in over-exploited assessment units shall not be permitted. NOC shall not be granted to new packaged water industries in overexploited areas,” the notification says.

A previous version of the notification permitted extraction by packaged drinking water companies in the over-exploited areas.

However, those exempt from seeking NOCs in the latest guidelines are : Individual domestic consumers in both rural and urban areas for drinking water and domestic uses, rural drinking water supply schemes, Armed Forces Establishments and Central Armed Police Forces establishments in both rural and urban areas, Agricultural activities and Micro and small Enterprises drawing groundwater less than 10 cubic metres/day.

All residential apartments/ group housing societies/ Government water supply agencies in urban areas would be required to pay ground water abstraction charges.

All industries/mining/ infrastructure projects drawing groundwater in safe, semi-critical and critical assessment units will have to pay groundwater abstraction charges based on quantum of groundwater extraction and category of assessment unit.

On December 2018, the CGWB (Central Ground Water Board) issued a draft notification that proposed a ‘water conservation fee’ for industrial extraction and this was roundly criticised. The National Green Tribunal stayed the draft in January 2019 terming it “unsustainable,” and having “serious shortcomings.” This led to several applications by commercial and industrial units for NOCs being on hold.

The latest guidelines also impose heavy fines for not complying with NOC requirements. For instance, not constructing appropriate water recharge structures could bring a fine of up to Rs 500,000 and injecting treated/untreated water into an aquifer system could set back a company by 10,00,000.

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