

BREATHER FOR COAL PLANTS DRAWS ANGUISH

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

The new deadline spans from December 2024 to 2026. Rick Bowmer

The Union Environment Ministry has for the third time extended the deadline by which coal plants must install pollution-control technologies to reduce emissions, drawing criticism from environment and clean-energy activists.

The Ministry first specified emission norms for the control of sulphur dioxide (SO₂), nitrogen oxides (NO_x) and mercury (Hg) from coal-fired power plants in December 2015, giving thermal power plant operators time until December 2017 to install equipment to contain emission of these pollutants. The deadline was then extended to 2022.

Power plants in the National Capital Region, which witnesses some of the worst pollution levels, were given a tighter deadline of 2020. However, non-compliance and limited progress by the plants in the region and elsewhere in the country led to a new extension in March 2021, followed by the notification on Monday pushing it to 2025.

According to the latest notification, power plants within a 10-km radius of the NCR and in the vicinity of cities with a population of more than one million have until December 31, 2024, to meet the deadline. For power plants within a 10-km radius of “critically polluted” areas (as designated by the Environment Ministry), the deadline has been extended to December 31, 2025. Finally, for all other power plants across the country, the deadline stands at December 31, 2026.

While multiple timeline extensions have been given for the installation of flue gas de-sulphurisation equipment, there are sustained efforts toward diluting or doing away with the norms by the power plants, say environmentalists.

“This is evident from the communications in the past and studies put out by the Central Electricity Authority (CEA) and the Union Ministry of Power (MoP), which ignore the basic science and chemistry of SO₂’s role in building up PM_{2.5} concentrations through sulphate formation,” said Sunil Dahiya, analyst at the Centre for Research on Energy and Clean Air.

Ritwick Dutta, environmental lawyer and founder of Legal Initiative for Forest and Environment (LIFE), said, “The fact that another extension has been given clearly shows that the emission norms will never be implemented. All power plants were required to achieve the target for emission standards by December 2017. All missed the target.”

Nivit Yadav of the Centre for Science and Environment (CSE), said, “Our analysis shows that till date, only 4% of India’s coal power capacity has installed equipment to control SO₂ emissions and another 41% has identified the vendors for equipment. The remaining 55% of the capacity has not taken any concrete steps to meet the norms.”

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