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The SBWL approval was granted after the National Board for Wildlife (NBWL), under the Union Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change (MoEFCC), started reviewing the rail project and asked about the reasons behind the inordinate delay in implementing it, documents suggest.

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By Jayashree Nandi, Hindustan Times New Delhi



The proposed rail track will pass through a wildlife corridor between Bedthi Conservation Reserve (BCR) and Kali Tiger Reserve (KTR), a natural habitat for many species, including tigers and elephants. (HT photo/ Ramki Sreenivasan)

New Delhi: A 20-year-old rail line project in the Western Ghats in Karnataka, which was rejected by several statutory bodies in the past and remained shelved amid fears the extent of irreparable damage it could cause to primary forests and unique biodiversity, has got the State Board for Wildlife (SBWL) authorities' nod March 20, reversing its rejection move 11 days earlier.

The SBWL approval was granted after the National Board for Wildlife (NBWL), under the Union Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change (MoEFCC), started reviewing the rail project and asked about the reasons behind the inordinate delay in implementing it, documents suggest.

However, the SBWL's approval has raised several serious environmental concerns that had held up the project for the past two decades.

At least 101 scientists have endorsed a letter written by 11 ecologists and wildlife biologists to the NBWL member-secretary and Union Minister for Environment, Forest and Climate Change Prakash Javadekar on July 2, raising several concerns about the Hubballi Ankola Railway Line Project (HARP) in Karnataka, including irreversibly damaging forests, fragmenting wildlife habitats in the Western Ghats, a global

biodiversity hotspot and a United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) world heritage site.

The project is likely to come for NBWL's nod before other requisite clearances are sought.

The proposed rail track will pass through a wildlife corridor between Bedthi Conservation Reserve (BCR) and Kali Tiger Reserve (KTR), a natural habitat for many species, including tigers and elephants. The project involves deforestation of around 1.9 lakh trees.

The habitat of Great Pied and Malabar Pied Hornbills, both keystone species -- species critical for the survival of other species in the region -- are likely to have a major impact due to the project.

It also passes through habitats that host many endemic and endangered species such as the Malabar Tree Toad, cited the letter that has quoted from various peer-review papers in a bid to bolster their argument.

The letter and details of the project are also published on Conservation India website that is spearheading a campaign to protect ecology.

“No amount of mitigation will compensate for the damage to the ecosystem that will be lost for good. Ultimately, the well-being of local communities will be jeopardised,” the letter said.

The Western Ghats Biodiversity Hotspot has already lost 33,000 square kilometres (km), or up to 40% of its forest cover, in the last 100 years, according to scientists.

A significant proportion of this forest loss is attributed to linear projects such as power transmission lines, highways, and construction of dams.

“The existing railway line (Tinai Ghat-Castlerock), located around 50 km north of the proposed site, along with several state roads and power lines have significantly contributed to fragmenting forests of the region and creating edges. Implementing HARP will create many more edges by splitting 10 large forest patches of conservation significance into 15 smaller patches,” said the letter, endorsed by over a hundred scientists from various research organisations.

They have argued that mitigation measures would not be able to counter the ecological impacts.

Earlier, this project was rejected by the Supreme Court (SC)-constituted Central Empowered Committee (CEC) in 2015 and by the National Tiger Conservation Authority (NTCA) in 2018, according to documents seen by HT.

The MoEFCC's Forest Advisory Committee (FAC) had also raised several issues regarding the project.

“The CEC is of the considered view that the project would cause huge and irreparable damage to forests, wildlife and biodiversity of the Western Ghats, which would far outweigh the actual tangible benefits of the project. The CEC report was based on a number of hearings, documents, and meetings with various senior Karnataka government officials,” the CEC had said while rejecting HARP.

A MoEFCC letter to principal secretary (forests) Karnataka dated September 29, 2018, had stated that a site inspection committee of NTCA has rejected the project because out of

the six tiger occupied landscapes in India, Western Ghats tops on habitat connectivity and contiguity counts.

The project has come up, pending NBWL and other national-level approvals, despite a spate of rejections in the past.

HT has seen the minutes of Karnataka SBWL meeting, which suggests that the project was rejected unanimously by board members and special invitees on March 9.

The minutes suggest that a majority of SBWL members had opposed the project.

The additional chief secretary (ACS), forests, Karnataka had said since the rail network is already strengthened between Tinnaihat-Castlerock-Caranzol, HARP is redundant.

Karnataka chief secretary (CS), who was the special invitee in the SBWL meeting, cited the Centre's enquiry regarding the delay in the project's implementation.

In the March 20 meeting, the Board contradicted its own decision.

The minutes show that a number of special invitees attended the meeting, including the state minister of industries and the CS along with chief minister BS Yediyurappa.

The Board recommended the project in view of development in north Karnataka region.

Environmentalists have found holes in SBWL's nod to the project.

"The decision taken on March 9 to reject the proposal was in conformity with legal and statutory procedures. However, hand-picked Special Invitees with no expertise in wildlife were allowed to deliberate at a hurriedly convened meeting on March 20 violating all procedural norms. This smacks of arbitrariness. There is no legal provision under the Wildlife Act, 1972, that empowers the State Board to review its own decision taken after completion of a statutory process," said Praveen Bhargav of the Bengaluru-based Wildlife First, a conservation advocacy group.

"Supreme Court-appointed expert committees, senior government officials, ecologists and conservationists have repeatedly recommended against approving this project. They have questioned the very necessity of the project and raised serious reservations on impacts on tribal and other forest-dependent communities. Serious impacts on important wildlife habitats, tree and fragmentation of important corridors have also been raised. The state government's decision to approve this project against such advice undermines the purpose of legally mandated expert appraisals. Mitigation measures are a feeble justification for a project of severe consequences and which has been in a regulatory tug of war for several years," said Kanchi Kohli, legal researcher, Centre for Policy Research.

HT had sent queries on whether Javadekar had received the scientists' representation on Monday but did not get a response till Tuesday evening.

Another NBWL, member, however, said on condition of anonymity that all members had received the representation and it would be deliberated upon.

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