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Environment ministry to get stricter with clearances

All mining and industrial projects in the country need a nod from the ministry before proceeding

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New Delhi: The ministry of environment and forests would like to see a higher rejection rate in environmental and forest clearances, said Jairam Ramesh, who holds independent charge of the ministry.

"That will mean we are doing a good job," the minister said. "We have already returned a few projects where diversion of good forest land was required and a few involving mining in hill states," he said.

All mining and industrial projects in the country need a nod from the ministry before proceeding.

The current rate of approval is around 98%, which the minister termed as "unnatural". He also promised a much faster and more transparent process of clearance.



Better transparency: Environment minister Jairam Ramesh. Kamal Singh / PTI

The environmental clearance process has been criticized as lacking credibility and transparency, reported in 'Mint' on 27 December, 2007.

"The promise of higher rejection rate is a beginning. But the more important points than 10 projects being rejected is whether they

are in eco-sensitive areas in terms of conservation and livelihood,"

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said Ritwick Dutta, an environmental lawyer with Legal Initiative for Forests and Environment, a public interest law group.

"Also, whether the projects being rejected are public or private companies, as closing down private enterprises is much harder. And lastly, do the rejections also take into account past non-compliance of pollution norms?" Dutta asked.

The environment minister also accepted the resignation of P. Abraham as chairman of the ministry's expert appraisal committee for river valley and hydroelectric projects on grounds of conflict of interest.

Abraham sits on the boards of a number of companies with interests in hydropower.

The environment ministry announced four conditions that will have to be met for environmental clearances. All project proponents will now have to make public their clearance letters and status of compliance with environmental norms, including results of monitoring data, and an annual environmental statement.

Ramesh said that the trend of laying foundation stones for projects before environmental and forest clearances have been obtained will have to stop and so will the use of in-principle approvals to start projects.

"This tendency to treat environmental and forest clearances as a mere formality will no longer be acceptable," the minister said.

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