

ALAKNANDA HYDROPOWER PROJECT: MoEF approves project rejected twice by FAC in critical wildlife area

The Union Ministry for Environment and Forests, the custodian of our environment has intervened to give forest clearance to a 300 MW Alaknanda Hydro project of GMR group that was rejected twice by Forest Advisory Committee, once in May 2011 and again in Oct 2011!

As the FAC minutes of May 2011 notes, the report from Wildlife Institute of India, commissioned by MEF following the CEC and SC recommendations on cumulative impacts of projects in Ganga basin had clearly said that the project should not be given clearance considering that:

- The Alaknanda-Badrinath hydro project is located in the buffer zone of Nanda Devi Biosphere Reserve which has two core zones the Nanda Devi National Park (NP) and Valley of Flowers NP. Both the core zones are inscribed as UNESCO World Heritage Site.
- The proposed Alaknanda-Badrinath & Khiron ganga hydro project falls in the same stretch and these may pose a serious threat to the existence and movement of species such as the snow leopard and brown bear.
- Hence, the construction of Alaknanda-Badrinath hydro project is likely to cause severe fragmentation and degradation of important wildlife habitats as well as habitat of above mentioned RET species (including 16 RDB plant species)
- Any further developmental activities in the form of proposed hydro projects on the river Alaknanda, Khiron ganga and Laxman ganga (Pulna hydro-electric project) will seriously affect the Outstanding Universal Values of the World Heritage Site due to cumulative impacts.
- The proposed Badrinath and Khiron ganga hydro-electric projects will seriously hamper the movement of species such as the snow leopard and brown bear in Nanda Devi BR as this is the only remaining stretch that is an important corridor for movement of these species. As the rare and endangered brown bear has its eastern most distribution limits in this area, the proposed hydro-electric and other developmental activities will further lead to habitat loss and degradation, and consequently shrinkage of the distribution range of this species.

- Thus, FAC decided, "FAC took a considered view of the matter. ***The FAC recommends that prior approval of the Central Government in accordance with the Section-2 of the Forest (Conservation) Act, 1980 for diversion of forestland required for construction of Kotlibhel-IB, Kotlibhel-II and Alaknanda Badrinath Hydropower projects may not be accorded.***" (Emphasis added)

That conclusion was again repeated in the Oct 12, 2011 meeting. As noted by FAC, the WII report was following the CEC and SC orders.

WII report has accorded highest conservation value of 3 to the area affected by this project, among the five projects they has specifically assessed in their report.

But the ministry, over ruling the WII's elaborate reasoning and two rejections of statutory FAC, on Nov 8, 2011 accorded forest clearance to the project.

MoEFs clearance letter dated Nov 8, 2011, only states the usual conditions that any FC letter has, without even acknowledging the highest conservation value that WII accords to the affected area or all the serious impacts listed by WII.

SANDRP Wrote to the Minister, Secretary and other officials of the Union Ministry of Environment and Forests and Director General, Forests, about this on the 5th Dec, 2011. We have not received any response: Such wanton disregard about ecology from MoEF is indeed shocking. We need an independent inquiry to assess why this decision was taken and who played what role. Before that, this decision should be reversed immediately.