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Exemptions from Environmental Clearances

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Why in News

The Environment Ministry has issued a notification to exempt oil and gas firms from seeking environmental clearance for **on-shore and offshore drilling explorations**.

Onshore drilling refers to drilling deep holes under the earth's surface whereas offshore drilling relates to drilling underneath the seabed.

These drilling methods are used in order to extract natural resources – usually oil and gas – from the earth.

Key Points

- **Demotion of Exploratory Projects:** The notification has **demoted exploratory projects** to the **category of 'B2'** in the process of **Environment Impact Assessment (EIA)**.

Category B projects are appraised at the **state level** and they are classified into two types.

- Category B1 projects (Mandatorily requires EIA).
- Category B2 projects (Do not require EIA).
- **Exceptions :** The development of an offshore or onshore drilling site as a hydrocarbon block will continue to be classified as a “category A”.
- **Decentralisation:** The exemption is part of a process of ‘decentralisation’ by the Centre as it seeks to delegate more regulatory actions to State and local units.

Background

Previously, exploratory surveys required the highest level of environmental scrutiny and were classified under **category 'A' projects**.

- The category 'A' project needs to prepare an EIA plan and is scrutinised by a Centrally constituted committee of experts.
- The project would also be subject to a public hearing involving the locals of the proposed project site.
- Though, Public hearings, for category 'A' projects, are generally exempted if they are offshore projects

Environmental Concerns

- The exploratory drilling process is an **ecologically-intensive exercise** that involves digging multiple wells and conducting seismic surveys offshore. Thus exemptions may cause **loss of biodiversity**.
- The offshore drilling operations can possibly affect fish, lead to a build-up of heavy water contaminants, disorient whales and sea life.
- The risk of **oil spills** threatens the coastal as well as terrestrial ecosystems.

Source: TH