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Rules Eased for Development in Buffer Zones

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The Union Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change has relaxed the procedure for environmental clearances of developmental activities in the **buffer zone**.

- Buffer Zone is an area supposed to reinforce conservation of protected area. This move is likely to weaken the protection offered to **wildlife sanctuaries and national parks**.
- As per an office memorandum (OM), the projects outside the boundary of the notified **Eco-Sensitive Zone (ESZ)** of a sanctuary or national park **but within 10 km radius of the park** will not need prior clearance from the **National Board for Wildlife (NBWL)**.
 - The **Wildlife Conservation Strategy of 2002 recommends a buffer of 10 km** around sanctuaries.
 - **ESZ** are formed to serve as “shock absorber” for protected areas. The basic aim here is to regulate certain activities around national parks and wildlife sanctuaries to minimise negative impact on the fragile ecosystem around.
- Such proposals will now get **environmental clearance from the ministry’s Expert Appraisal Committee (EAC)**, which will ensure “appropriate conservation measures in the form of recommendations”.
- **Projects within the notified ESZ** will require the NBWL’s nod, which can be applied for together with the initial “terms of reference” application.
- **Mining** will be prohibited within the notified ESZ or within only one km from the boundary of the park, whichever is higher according to the new OM.
- It **nullifies previous OMs** dated February 27, 2007 and December 2, 2009, which made the NBWL’s approval mandatory for projects within a 10 km radius of the park.

National Board for Wildlife

As per the amendment of the **Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972** in 2002, a provision was incorporated for the constitution of the **National Board for Wildlife (NBWL)**, replacing the Indian Board for Wildlife.

- The National Board for Wildlife has 47 members with the **Prime Minister in the Chair**.
- The Minister in charge of the Ministry of Environment & Forests in the Central Government is the Vice-Chairperson.
- The Board is responsible for promotion of conservation and development of wildlife and forests.

Concerns

- This completely defeats the purpose of recognising 10 km around protected areas as areas that need to be recognised for their conservation value.
- It also reads down the importance of ensuring wildlife related scrutiny at the time of environment clearances.

Issues and loopholes

- In many states, **protected areas do not have an ESZ of 10 km** as specified by the Supreme Court. Some have a **buffer zone of a few hundred metres to one-km radius**, while other states still have **not notified an ESZ**.
- In cases where the ESZ notification is in the draft stage, a nod from NBWL is needed and can be applied for along with environmental clearance.
For example, the Jim Corbett National Park has not notified its ESZ, but its draft notification provides a buffer of 1 km, while Bandipur Tiger Reserve has notified an ESZ of 7.7 km radius. ESZ for other tiger reserves like Nagarhole, Biligiriranga Temple Sanctuary and Ranthambore haven't been notified.
- The SC had directed states and the Centre on several occasions to enforce the ESZ .
The SC in its September 2017 order, in the context of reduction of 10 km ESZ to 100m, had strongly observed that since an order of this nature is capable of destroying national parks and wildlife sanctuaries in the country.
- The real worry, therefore is that ESZs around parks and sanctuaries may not achieve the envisioned goal of acting as shock absorbers and protection of corridors.

Source: Hindustan Times