

Environment Ministry blocks Renuka Dam project

No clearance for the 3,600-crore project in view of threat to 17 lakh trees

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NEW DELHI: The Union Environment and Forests Ministry has decided not to give its approval for the Renuka Dam project in Himachal Pradesh on the ground that it would involve cutting down of a large number of trees.

The Ministry's decision not to give the mandatory clearance to the project has come as a "setback" to the Delhi Government and the Delhi Jal Board as they have been banking on the Renuka Dam project to alleviate the Capital's water worries.

Wednesday's announcement was far from what the water utility and the Delhi Government were expecting. A senior Delhi Government official said the project had

been hanging fire for a long time and the Union Ministry's decision has further heightened concerns about the Capital's water woes.

"This (dam) was the only identified and assured supply of water for Delhi. Each year with the increase in population the demand for water is progressively growing. While the Delhi Jal Board can only manage water, cut down on distribution losses and reinforce water conservation, it needs more water from sources apart from its own ground water reserves to meet the growing demand."

The Ministry on the other hand has declined to give the go-ahead to the Rs. 3,600-crore project even though land acquisition work is almost over and the Himachal Pradesh Power Corporation

• A huge setback for Delhi as it was banking on the project to mitigate its water woes

• Chief Minister Sheila Dikshit will take up the issue with the Centre once Games are over

Limited (HPPCL) is in the final stage of inviting global tenders to implement the project.

'Can't be a parasite'

While the forest clearance was actually recommended by the Forest Advisory Committee, Union Minister for Environment and Forests Jairam Ramesh overrode their advice and decided to reject the clearance. "As much as 775 hectares of good quality forest land is a very steep price to pay," he said. "Delhi must learn to use the

tougher options that are available." Mr. Ramesh pointed out that Delhi's water system has distribution losses of over 45 per cent and added that under-pricing of water also contributed to wasteful habits. "Delhi simply cannot be a parasite on the rest of the country," he said.

The proposed Renuka Dam planned on the Giri river with a storage capacity of 542 million cubic metres of water and an installed capacity of 40 MW of power was expected to supply Delhi with an additional 275 MGD (million

gallons a day) of water.

Hoping for a reprieve, the Jal Board is now waiting for Chief Minister Sheila Dikshit to take up the issue with the Centre and also with the Himachal Government. A senior Jal Board official said the Jal Board is yet to receive "formal communication from the Ministry on the issue".

"The Delhi Jal Board has been working to erase all concerns that have been put before it in the past. It has also released over Rs.215 crore for land acquisition for the project. Once the Commonwealth Games are over, the issue will be taken up for review and we are hopeful that whatever the concerns of the Union Ministry of Environment and Forests, there will be a resolution," the official said.

In December 2008 the Environment Appraisals Committee of MoEF had agreed in principle to construction of the Renuka Dam in Himachal Pradesh. It was then expected that with the clearance, the work on the dam would begin soon and get over in the next six years.

As per the agreement signed earlier, Delhi was committed to pay Rs.3,000 crore for the entire project, wherein water from the Dam would be brought into the Yamuna through the Giri river; it would then be released at the Hathni Kund barrage and from there passed into the Munak Channel and supplied to the city.

Construction of the dam was initially stalled after Haryana and Rajasthan refused to sign the agreement. Ac-

cording to the agreement signed in November 1994, Delhi would get the full supply of water from the Renuka dam till the Kishau Dam and Lakhwar-Vyasi Dam projects become functional, while Himachal Pradesh would retain the full power generated.

The project was also disapproved of by locals, apprehending displacement. A large number of local groups and villagers have been protesting against the project in Himachal Pradesh. "About 17 lakh trees would have been destroyed by the dam project," said Puran Chand of Renuka Bandh Sangharsh Samiti, sounding relieved by the refusal of clearance. "History is witness to the fact that rehabilitations never take place."