

Demwe hydroelectric project put on hold

Wildlife board worried over the impact of public-private project on wildlife habitats



The Lohitfloodplains, immediately downstream of dam, constitute an Important Bird Area as per international criteria and is also a potential Ramsar site (Photos: NeerajVagholikar)

The standing committee of the National Board for Wildlife (NBWL) has put the Demwe Lower Hydroelectric Project in Arunachal Pradesh on hold till an expert committee assesses its impact on the flora fauna downstream.

The project is proposed on 1,590 ha near the Kamlang Wildlife Sanctuary

It involves felling of around 43,000 trees near the sanctuary

The project obtained environmental clearance in February last year

The project is very close to the chapories (riverine islands) and DibruSaikhowa National Park. Both support populations of some critically endangered bird species, including the Bengal Florican

The distance of the reservoir, created in the project, would be just 50 metres from Kamlang sanctuary

On October 14, the standing committee of the NBWL decided to send AsadRahmani, director of the Bombay Natural History Society and Pratap Singh, chief conservator of forest (wildlife) of Arunachal Pradesh, to the project area to assess the possible impacts of the project on wildlife

A separate meeting of NBWL may be convened later this month, after the submission of the report, to discuss the feasibility of the project

The 1,750 MW project is being executed jointly by Athena Demwe Power Ltd, promoted by the India-based Athena Energy Ventures Pvt Ltd, and the Government of Arunachal Pradesh in Lohit district and is scheduled to be commissioned during the 12th Five-Year Plan. It is to be built in an area of 1,590 hectares near the Kamlang Wildlife Sanctuary and involves felling of around 43,000 trees near the sanctuary. The project had received environmental clearance in February last year. The forest clearance for the project is, however, pending. The forest advisory committee of the environment ministry had referred the project to NBWL last year as it was in the vicinity of a wildlife sanctuary and a national park.

In its meeting on October 14, the standing committee of the NBWL decided to send a two-member team—AsadRahmani, director of the Bombay Natural History Society and Pratap Singh, chief conservator of forest (wildlife) of Arunachal Pradesh—to the project area to assess the possible impacts of the project on wildlife. A separate meeting of NBWL may be convened later this month after the submission of the report to discuss the feasibility of the project.

Close to two Important Bird Areas

The decision of the NBWL has come after the non-official members of its standing committee raised concern over the impact of the project on wildlife in the region. Rahmani, a non-official member of the committee, had pointed out the proposed dam would have significant negative impact on at least two important wildlife habitats: the chapories (riverine islands) of the Lohit River and the DibruSaikhowa National Park, according to the minutes of the standing committee meeting.



Lohit river valley where the project is proposed is rich in biodiversity.

The minutes were made public recently. “Both of these were designated as Important Bird Areas, and also supported populations of some critically endangered bird species, including the Bengal Florican, which was a Schedule I species under the Wildlife Protection Act with about a surviving population of less than 500,” Rahmani said in the meeting.

PrernaBindra, regional coordinator (tiger programme) of US-based non-profit, Panthera, and a non-official member of NBWL standing committee, said the distance from the site was misrepresented in the proposal. Though mentioned at a projected aerial distance of 8.5 km from the Kamlang Sanctuary, this is only the distance from the dam and not from the closest component of the project--the reservoir, which is only 50 metres from the sanctuary. Responding to the argument put forth by the Arunachal Pradesh authorities that the development of the state depended on the dam, she pointed out that surely it did not rest on it alone and that there were about 147 hydropower projects on the anvil in the state, of which about nine were in the Lohit river basin. "It was, therefore, essential that a cumulative impact assessment study was conducted," said Bindra in the meeting.



Parasuramkund, the site of the 1,750 MW Demwe Lower project. The place is a heritage site in Arunachal Pradesh. The dam-axis is just 800 metres upstream of the kund as the crow flies and the power house would be even closer

She also pointed out that the National Environment Appellate Authority passed an interim order in May 2010, by which it directed the environment ministry to ask NBWL standing committee to examine downstream impact on river dolphins and important bird areas. This was not mentioned in the proposal put before the committee. M D Madhusudan, of Nature Conservation Foundation in Mysore, said the water impounding area was just adjoining the Kamlang Sanctuary and that birds are regularly seen in this area.

The principal chief conservator of forests and forest secretary of Arunachal Pradesh, who was also present in the meeting, however, says that an impact assessment study had been done by the State wildlife department on the downstream stretch of the Lohit River. "The study found that there would be very minimal impact on the wild fauna downstream," he said in the meeting.