No easing of mining norms

However, Forest Advisory Committee relaxes procedure for firms to apply for permits

The Environment Ministry’s apex forest body has shot down a joint proposal by the Coal, Petroleum and Mining ministries to fully exempt themselves from Forest department permissions to scale up the density of exploratory boreholes, used to prospect for minerals, in forests. However, it has provided some relaxations.

Heavy machinery

Mining companies deploy heavy machinery and rigs to dig test, or exploratory boreholes, which are thin, cylindrical caverns that usually go hundreds of metres underground to look for signs of metals, minerals and coal. Currently companies can dig up to 20 boreholes a square kilometre in forests without taking the Central government’s permission. The Coal Ministry consortium wanted to be able to tunnel more boreholes per square-kilometre without seeking the Forest Advisory Committee (FAC)permission.

“The exploration of coal and other ferrous and non-ferrous metals... damages the forest area. Exempting large-scale non-forest activities such as drilling of 15-20 boreholes/sq km for prospecting of minerals is not acceptable,” the FAC records of March 22 meeting show. The proceedings of the meeting were made available on the Environment Ministry website on Wednesday. However, agreeing that prospecting for ores and minerals were “necessary too,” the FAC eased the procedure for companies to apply for permits.

States’ powers

Not all applications, the committee has decreed, now required the Central government’s permission. State governments could permit the commissioning of such boreholes, provided they involved forests that had a tree-canopy density of less than 40%, or what are called ‘open forests’. For more heavily forested areas, the Central government’s permissions would be required.

That apart, companies that conducted surveys would have to pay a compensatory cost that would be linked to the area under lease, and the agency would have to plant 20 tall trees per bore-hole area.

The Environment Ministry and the Coal Ministry have earlier carried out studies to ascertain the impact of mining on India’s forests.

After deliberations, it was decided to allow exploratory boreholes in open and moderately dense forests. While the Ministry has eased the application process, it has said that there could be no permission accorded to companies to prospect in national parks and wildlife sanctuaries.