

PRESS RELEASE

Aaranyak's concern on recent issues of coal mining and Oil exploration in biodiversity rich areas of Eastern Assam

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Aaranyak, a premier NGO working in the field of research and conservation of biodiversity and environment protection in NE India, has expressed its views, in response to the raging issue highlighted by different media outlets regarding the approval being granted for open cast coal mining in Saleki Proposed Reserved Forest within Dehing Patkai Elephant Reserve. We would like to state that open cast coal mining should be done away with in phased manner in eastern Assam by creating alternative livelihood opportunities for local people whose livelihood is dependent upon the on-going legal coal mining. While it acknowledges the need for extraction of coal for nation's development, it urges user agencies and Ministry of Mining to explore other environment friendly technologies for future extraction of coal without affecting biodiversity rich areas. We are also of the view that renewable energy options like solar power should be widely promoted to reduce dependence on coal-fired power in the long run in the NE region.

Aaranyak has also expresses its serious concern that while user agency like coal companies, do pay compensation to the forest department for the forest areas taken on lease for extraction of coal and the fund goes to CAMPA (Compensatory Afforestation Fund Management and Planning Authority), no health insurance support is provided to local people living in areas surrounding coal mining sites even though impact of coal mining does affect their health to a great extent. Hence, Aaranyak demands that government and user agency should also take the responsibility of providing health insurance cover for people residing within 10km radius of such coal mining sites.

Aaranyak also urges government to undertake an environmental impact assessment (EIA) of on-going coal mining activities including people's health and livelihood. Till the EIA report is finalised and follow up remedial measures are initiated; no fresh open cast coal mining project should be considered.

Furthermore, Aaranyak also raises few concerns on the proposed Oil India Limited (OIL), India's drill in Dibru Saikhowa National Park. Referring to a Press statement issued by OIL few days back, Aaranyak mentions that the OIL proposes to use a new technology named as 'Extended Reach Drill' or ERD for exploring hydrocarbon reserves beneath the ground in Dibru Saikhowa National Park. OIL further claims that while drilling will take place at an average distance of more than 1.5 km from the Park boundary with a target depth of 3.5-4 km below the surface. In this regard, Aaranyak as an environment conservation organisation demands an adequate explanation with supporting documentary evidence on the following points:

1. "We would like to know whether OIL has already been using the ERD technology as mentioned above elsewhere in Assam? If so, we demand that the documentary evidence of the use of this technology by oil company and the related studies on the environment should be produced by the agency in public domain".

2. “We are concerned about the environmental impact of the of drilling using ERD technology, which to the best of our knowledge, has not yet tested in the eastern Assam landscape and its sensitive ecosystems which is likely to be threatened by its application. The EIA report of December 2018 by ERM India Pvt. Ltd. mentions about pollution sources and expresses concerns on the possibility of noise pollution to be a reason for fauna, particularly birds moving away from the project site temporarily. Since, from the existing EIA report it is not clear on what would be the radius of impact in the project site, we demand a proper investigation from OIL in this matter.”

3. “We are also concerned on the discharge of pollutants from oil drilling into a nearby natural drainage channel as per Schedule I of the “Standards for Emission or Discharge of Environmental Pollutants from Oil Drilling and Gas Extraction Industry” of Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB), considering the presence of several nearby ecologically significant sites such as Dibru Saikhowa National Park as well as nearby Maguri- Motapong wetland. This is of particular concern, as the entire ecosystem of Dibru Saikhowa as well as Maguri-Motapong is wetland dependent and some of the globally threatened species found in the area are known to be sensitive to the increase of even minor amounts of pollution as well as physical disturbance. Hence, the standard guidelines may need to be reassessed and reviewed prior to the discharge of any pollutant in the area.”

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