

Confined GM trials with adequate safeguards is the way forward

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Minister of environment, forests and climate change **Prakash Javadekar** said in an interview that the government is finally ready to give the go-ahead for confined trials of genetically modified (GM) crops, but with full safeguards. "Scientific evaluation and confined trials with adequate safeguards is the way forward," he said. Javadekar said he had removed the tag of "speed-breaker" the environment ministry had earned during the regime of the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) when it delayed green clearances for many industrial projects. Edited excerpts:

The environment ministry was considered an impediment to India's growth in the last few years. How have you addressed that in the last eight months? How many projects have received environment clearances?

I have not done a counting of files. That may be news for someone but that is not my intention. My intention is to give India a predictable policy regime. We are taking decisions based on policies, we are taking decision for transparent mechanisms, we are avoiding delays. Three things—now we have made the processes online... more than 2,000 applications of various kinds are now being processed in states and in our ministry. More importantly, what is happening here is we have taken policy decisions and according to the policy whoever fits into that policy gets nod. So it has become an automatic route in a way. That is how we wanted to give it a feeling and we have done that successfully. Now I have asked my officers that while every file is submitted for sanction, they must come up with three figures—how it will impact people, how much investment is coming through that project and how much employment will be created, both direct and indirect employment. Earlier, it never used to be clearly indicated. It will now be done from January onwards. But I can tell you millions of jobs which were locked in files in environment ministry and hundreds of thousands of crores of rupees of investment which were locked in pendency we have unlocked through a transparent mechanism and a predictable policy regime.

But the environment ministry has been criticized for giving unprecedented clearances during your tenure. How do you defend the ministry?

Let me tell you again that what we are doing is that we are now giving more importance to envi-



Changing image: Javadekar says the environment ministry has removed the tag of 'speed-breaker' that it had earned during the UPA regime.

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ronment protection. So while clearing the projects we are giving them conditions for more concrete actions for environment. Secondly, within next 3-4 months, you will see we will make our monitoring mechanism stronger and we will make this movement of compliance. Otherwise, earlier people used to say give any condition but give sanction...but now I am saying that I will not give any conditions... We will give practical conditions, more environmental-friendly conditions but, at the same time, those follow-up we will do and see compliance is done.

But monitoring is known as the weakest point of environment ministry? What exactly are you doing for that?

That is what we want to make stronger. There is already an issue of regulatory or authority. It is one part but the second is we are looking at suggestions of the T.S.R. Subramanian committee report, which has suggested some committees within ministry. Our brainstorming sessions are on and I am seeking new inputs. We will definitely finalize our plan by March-end and then we will take it to cabinet secretariat as we will require some additional manpower, some mechanisms and some changes in rules and regulations. But if that happens, the states will be on board. We have created the regional empowered committees (RECs)—that is a new mechanism. I just held a meeting of all RECs wherein the states have got representation for the first time... We are making the monitoring mechanism more robust by taking into account views of all stakeholders.

You have spoken of self certification procedure for industry as suggested in the TSR committee report. But industry's track report has not been very encouraging.

How will you ensure that?

We have not accepted it (self certification) as yet. T.S.R. Subramanian committee has given 55 major recommendations but today I can't say which is accepted and which is not accepted. We will complete our due diligence by 15 March on TSR committee recommendations and others also—or by March-end.

It has also been alleged that your ministry is being micromanaged from the office of Prime Minister Narendra Modi? How do you respond to that?

No. Absolutely not. This is outrageous. What was the mantra of Modi government—more governance and less government—we are doing it. We are taking policy-based decisions and making process transparent. So, it becomes nearly an automatic route. That is how we want to go ahead and take major policy decisions in many areas which are still not being decided upon.

There are also a lot of important pending decisions such as the appointment of Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB) chairman or the policy of violate/inviolate forests areas, which have not seen much movement till now. What is happening on that front?

CPCB appointment is in the process and I think within next two months we will have a full fledged CPCB chairman in place. As far as violate-inviolate is concerned, brainstorming is on and the process is near completion and after it is completed, we will take a decision...because these are major policy changes. And we have already fast-tracked eco-sensitive zones proposals.

It has been alleged that environment ministry is working to dilute the Forest Rights Act (FRA). What do you have to say about it?

No...absolutely not. What is FRA? Basically we fought for it...In 1980 it was Maharashtra BJP's (Bharatiya Janata Party's) application in Supreme Court which brought these forest rights

embedded. There are three essential rights. First is to live where they are living... though they don't own the land to till the land so the plots are now given with demarcation and third right is for collection and retuning of the minor forest produce...so these are the three rights available to forest dwellers that are staying in forests for more than three generation. There is a separate ministry—a ministry for tribal affairs. They will take a final decision. We are not doing away or diluting anything. This was the canard spread.

On issue of the genetically modified crops, you have been having regular meetings to persuade the anti-GM group. Have you achieved any breakthrough?

Now, I think everyone is on board. Scientific evaluation and confined trials with adequate safeguards is the way forward. We can't play with safety and that is what we are doing. Open field trials are confined trials. We have so many safeguards that it is completely isolated experiment on the field. We have already discussed in detail with anybody having any concern and now I think with adequate safeguards put in place, there is not much opposition.

What is your vision and dream for environment ministry?

My dream for this ministry is that this ministry was known as speed-breaker ministry and that tag has gone now. It has become a facilitating ministry and our slogan, therefore, now has been converted. Now it is development without destruction—zero effect, zero defect. Second, our ministry's image was about being a licence-permit-quota raj ministry. I want to convert it into a people-centric ministry. It's a people movement, then only we can conserve environment.

My dream projects are for clean air, clean water, clean energy and people's participation for environment. The national air quality programme that we had launched will now soon be functional which will show current health of each city. We want to do in 20 cities first.

In 2013, the Supreme Court had ordered for relocation of lions from Gujarat to Madhya Pradesh. Is there any progress on this issue?

The matter is sub-judice. We are not intervening in court matters.

The environment ministry was also planning to launch a forest satellite. Have you finalized anything as yet?

We are already in discussions with the Indian Space Research Organisation. It is not only about forests but coast, environment, air—there are many things which can be tapped through satellite mechanism. Let us see how ideas take shape.