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Recent Advances in

Environment & Forest Laws

with Special Reference to

Oil & Gas Sector

2nd Edition

2025

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1.0

Proceedings Report

1.1

Executive Summary

The 2nd Regional Workshop on Recent Advances in Environmental and Forest Laws with Special Reference to the Oil and Gas Sector convened on January 23, 2025, at the State Convention Centre, Pinewood Hotel, Shillong. Bringing together a distinguished assembly of policymakers, industry leaders, environmental experts, and regulatory bodies, the workshop aimed to address the critical challenges faced by the hydrocarbon sector in the ecologically sensitive yet resource-abundant Northeast region of India.

Opening Sessions: Setting the Tone for Collaboration

The workshop commenced with a warm welcome from Ms. Imtiena Ao, IFS, who highlighted the Northeast's pivotal role as the birthplace of India's oil industry and underscored the importance of fostering partnerships between regulators and industry stakeholders to harmonize development with conservation. Mr. Yash Malik, President of the Society for Petroleum Professionals (SPP), introduced the organization's mission and advocated for reclassifying oil and gas exploration as "projects of national importance," ensuring expedited clearances.

Key Presentations: Addressing Sectoral Challenges

Mr. T.K. Mathuriya of ONGC and Mr. Saloma Yamdo of Oil India Ltd. shed light on the operational bottlenecks faced by the sector, such as prolonged statutory clearances, compensatory afforestation delays, and wildlife-related restrictions. Proposals to adopt Extended Reach Drilling (ERD) beneath protected areas, streamline pipeline maintenance policies, and classify high-potential areas as strategic energy zones were put forth to accelerate development while minimizing environmental impact.

Dr. Vimal Kr. Hatwal, MS (Industry 2), MoEF&CC, discussed the importance of precise project proposals and accurate KML file submissions to expedite approvals, reflecting the Ministry's commitment to refining the clearance process. Mr. G.L. Das, HoD (Environment), DGH, outlined innovative measures like the Urja Pragati Portal and the establishment of the North East Coordination Committee to fast-track clearances and enhance transparency.

A pivotal moment of the workshop was Mr. J. Lahiri's comprehensive presentation on regulatory pain points. He detailed the challenges posed by changes to the Van (Sanrakshan Evam Samvardhan) Rules, financial burdens like disproportionate CAMPA fund contributions, and operational inefficiencies stemming from outdated processes. He advocated for reforms including longer validity for EIA reports, expedited ESZ notifications, and the reclassification of O&G projects near international borders as "strategic energy projects."

Panel Discussion: A Collaborative Vision for the Future

The panel discussion, chaired by Dr. Amandeep Garg, IAS, Additional Secretary, MoEF&CC, was the centerpiece of the workshop. Key themes included integrating EC and FC processes, streamlining wildlife clearance approvals, and fostering collaboration between states and operators. Recommendations included SOPs for uniform B2 category clearances, policy amendments to align O&G exploration with the unique challenges of the Northeast, and prioritization of projects with strategic national importance.

The panel also addressed long-standing issues such as encroachments on forest lands and delays in ESZ notifications, proposing site inspections and stakeholder consultations to bridge gaps. Innovative suggestions such as digitizing forest and wildlife maps and reinstating differentiated wildlife clearance processes for ESZ areas were also tabled.

Concluding Remarks: A Unified Call to Action

Dr. Garg's concluding address emphasized the need for collective action to resolve the sector's challenges while safeguarding the region's rich biodiversity. He reiterated the importance of aligning industrial growth with environmental stewardship, calling on all stakeholders to work together in achieving sustainable energy development.

1.2

Introduction

Amidst the serene hills of Shillong, the State Convention Centre at Pinewood Hotel buzzed with purposeful dialogue as the 2nd Edition of the Regional Workshop on Recent Advances in Environmental & Forest Laws with a special focus on the Oil & Gas Sector commenced on January 23rd, 2025. A distinguished gathering of environmental custodians, industry leaders, and policymakers convened, united by a common purpose—charting a sustainable path forward in the hydrocarbon-rich Northeast India.

The workshop, orchestrated by the Regional Office (RO) Shillong, MoEF&CC, in collaboration with the Society for Petroleum Professionals, unfolded as a seamless synergy of expertise and organization, thanks to Social Friendly's stellar coordination. Oil India Limited and ONGC Limited proudly shared the mantle as joint hosts.

Graced by the esteemed Chief Guest, Dr. Amandeep Garg, IAS, Additional Secretary of the MoEF&CC, and adeptly chaired by Ms. Imtienla Ao, IFS, Deputy Director General (Central), RO Shillong, MoEF&CC, the workshop provided a platform for robust discussions on the intricate balance between industrial advancement and environmental stewardship. Under the able convenorship of Mr. J. Lahiri, General Secretary of the Society for Petroleum Professionals (SPP), the event highlighted the evolving landscape of environmental and forest regulations and their implications for the oil and gas sector.

The illustrious participant list included frontline officers from MoEF&CC, senior forest officials from Arunachal Pradesh, Tripura, Meghalaya, and Manipur, as well as directors and senior executives from Oil India Ltd., ONGC, and M/S Vedanta Ltd. Their diverse perspectives enriched the discourse, building upon the foundational deliberations of the inaugural 2019 workshop that aligned with the Hydrocarbon Vision 2030 for Northeast India.

Through compelling presentations and interactive discussions, the workshop underscored the urgency of integrating sustainable energy practices into mainstream operations. The convergence of regulatory insights and industry innovations showcased at this forum not only emphasized the Northeast's pivotal role in India's energy landscape but also reaffirmed the nation's commitment to responsible resource management.

As voices resonated within the halls of the Pinewood Hotel, the message was clear—progress and preservation must walk hand in hand. The dialogues initiated in this gathering are set to echo beyond the confines of Shillong, steering the oil and gas sector towards a future where economic prosperity and environmental integrity are not competing interests but complementary goals.

1.3

Event Proceedings



Ms. Imtienla Ao
IFS, DDG (Central), RO, Shillong

Ms. Imtienla Ao's Visionary Address: Balancing Progress and Preservation

As the workshop commenced, the hall resonated with warmth and optimism as Ms. Imtienla Ao, IFS, DDG (Central), RO, Shillong, took the stage to deliver the welcome speech. With a bright New Year greeting, she set a tone of collaboration and purpose for the day ahead, gracefully blending regional pride with a forward-looking agenda.

In her address, Ms. Ao drew attention to the Northeast's extraordinary legacy as the cradle of India's oil industry, which began over 130 years ago. She eloquently spoke of how this region has not only fueled India's economic aspirations but also laid the foundation for its energy landscape. The oil, petroleum, and gas sectors, she noted, remain indispensable to India's growth story, serving as both a backbone and a catalyst for development.

Ms. Ao called upon all stakeholders—regulatory agencies, industry leaders, and policymakers—to come together as partners in progress. Emphasizing the critical need for synergy, she encouraged a spirit of open dialogue to address the challenges and opportunities that lie ahead. She urged participants to engage deeply in discussions that balance industrial ambitions with the pressing need for environmental conservation and social harmony.

Reflecting on the inaugural workshop in 2019, Ms. Ao

revisited the key unresolved issue of recognizing Oil & Gas Exploration and Development as a non-mining activity—a topic that had been referred to the Advocate General but remains pending resolution. She expressed hope that this edition would inspire fresh perspectives and actionable outcomes to move the conversation forward.

With her vision firmly rooted in inclusivity and sustainable progress, Ms. Ao also highlighted the key topics slated for discussion during the panel sessions. Her speech not only set the stage for a meaningful exchange of ideas but also reminded everyone of the shared responsibility to align innovation with environmental stewardship, leaving a lasting impression on the gathering.

Ending on an optimistic note, Ms. Ao envisioned a future where the Northeast could lead by example in demonstrating how industrial progress can coexist harmoniously with nature. "We stand at a crossroads," she concluded. "The choices we make today will define the legacy we leave behind—not just as policymakers or industry leaders, but as stewards of this planet."

Her address was met with resounding applause, a testament to her ability to inspire and galvanize the audience, setting the perfect foundation for the insightful discussions that followed.



Mr. Yash Malik
President, Society for Petroleum
Professionals (SPP)

1.3 Event Proceedings

Fuelling India's Energy Future: Mr. Yash Malik's Vision for Transforming the Oil & Gas Sector

Taking the stage with a dynamic energy, Mr. Yash Malik, President of the Society for Petroleum Professionals (SPP), introduced the organization with a vision that resonated deeply with the workshop's theme. As he spoke, his passion for advancing India's hydrocarbon potential was palpable, underscoring the critical role of collaboration in addressing the challenges faced by the oil and gas sector.

Mr. Malik highlighted the origins of SPP as a platform designed to unite the brightest minds from industry, academia, and policymaking. He shared the remarkable success of the organization's initiatives, including the Upstream Ahead Virtual Summit, in partnership with Social Friendly. The second edition of this summit, held in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, had drawn an audience of over 10,000 participants—an achievement that showcased the power of innovation and determination in navigating unprecedented challenges.

Turning to the hurdles in the domestic oil and gas sector, Mr. Malik pointed to the bottlenecks caused by slow forest clearances, particularly for exploration and development in forested areas. These delays, he explained, not only hinder domestic production but also impede India's goal of reducing its dependence on imported oil. However, there was a silver lining—the

recent revisions to the Oil and Gas Development (ORD) Act. Mr. Malik expressed optimism about these revisions, which aim to reclassify oil and gas development outside the mining category, thereby streamlining the clearance process. He called this a pivotal step towards faster and more efficient project development, anticipating its approval in the upcoming Budget Session.

In a visionary proposal, Mr. Malik advocated for granting "Project of National Importance" status to oil and gas exploration blocks located within 100 km of international borders. Drawing parallels with global energy giants like Saudi Arabia, Russia, and the U.S., where such projects are considered integral to national security, he urged India to follow suit. By doing so, India could exempt these critical projects from forest clearances and categorize them under B2 for expedited approvals.

Throughout his address, Mr. Malik emphasized the urgency of exploring India's untapped hydrocarbon potential and accelerating the pace of energy self-reliance. He concluded with heartfelt gratitude to the workshop organizers and extended an open invitation to dignitaries to join SPP, reinforcing the society's commitment to shaping the future of the nation's energy sector. His speech set a vibrant tone, inspiring a renewed sense of purpose among the attendees.



Mr. T.K. Mathuriya
Basin Manager, ONGC, Jorhat

1.3 Event Proceedings

Untapped Potential and Roadblocks: Mr. T.K. Mathuriya Highlights ONGC's Key Challenges

Mr. T.K. Mathuriya, Basin Manager of ONGC's Jorhat operations, brought to light some of the most pressing challenges faced by the oil and gas sector in his address. Speaking with candor, he detailed the obstacles that hinder exploration and development, particularly in resource-rich areas of the Northeast.

The Regulatory Maze

Mr. Mathuriya emphasized the lengthy timelines required to secure statutory clearances—Environmental (EC), Forest (FC), and Wildlife (WLC). These extended processes consume the lion's share of the limited validity periods (3–4 years) allocated to exploration blocks, leaving little time for actual operations. The result is a frustrating bottleneck that delays projects and stifles progress in unlocking the region's hydrocarbon potential.

Compensatory Afforestation Challenges

Another critical pain point, he noted, lies in the delays surrounding compensatory afforestation. The identification and allocation of land required for this essential component of forest clearance remain cumbersome and time-intensive, further hampering project timelines.

Wildlife Conservation Complications

Mr. Mathuriya turned attention to wildlife clearance challenges, citing the specific example of Bhairabnagar Conservation Reserve in Tripura. Notably, this area was notified as a conservation reserve only after the block's award, creating an unforeseen regulatory hurdle that has effectively stalled exploration efforts. This, he argued, underscores the need for greater coordination and foresight in regulatory planning.

The Untapped Assam Shelf and Nagaland

Concluding his speech, Mr. Mathuriya highlighted the high potential yet unexplored blocks in the Assam Shelf and Nagaland. Despite the rich resources these areas promise, unresolved regulatory hurdles such as DAB (Delineation, Approval, and Bifurcation) issues prevent ONGC from moving forward with exploration.

With his insightful analysis, Mr. Mathuriya painted a clear picture of the roadblocks that impede progress in the oil and gas sector. His call for streamlined processes and better alignment between regulatory frameworks and industry needs served as a wake-up call, urging all stakeholders to come together to unlock the vast potential hidden beneath the Northeast's landscapes.



Mr. Saloma Yomdo
Director (E&D), Oil India Ltd.



Ms. Mallika Baruah Sarma
Executive Director, Oil India Ltd.

1.3 Event Proceedings

Balancing Energy Goals with Conservation: Insights from Mr. Saloma Yamdo and Oil India Ltd.

Taking the podium, Mr. Saloma Yomdo, Director (E&D) of Oil India Ltd., delivered a succinct yet impactful speech, highlighting India's dual mandate to reduce oil imports by 10% while ambitiously aiming for net-zero emissions by 2040. His address painted a picture of the vast potential for offshore exploration—99% of offshore areas remain open for development—but underscored the significant challenges that persist onshore, especially in the ecologically sensitive and regulation-heavy landscapes of the Northeast.

Innovative Solutions to Complex Challenges

Mr. Yomdo proposed practical solutions to navigate these hurdles, including the adoption of Extended Reach Drilling (ERD) beneath protected areas like the Dibru Saikhowa National Park. This technique, he explained, could enable hydrocarbon extraction with minimal surface disruption, balancing industrial needs with conservation priorities. He also advocated for streamlining policies to ensure the timely maintenance of critical pipeline infrastructure, which is essential for operational efficiency and safety.

Following Mr. Yomdo's speech, Ms. Mallika Baruah Sarma, Executive Director of Oil India Ltd., delivered an in-depth presentation that outlined the key challenges faced by the organization, particularly in obtaining statutory clearances.

The Statutory Bottleneck: Pain Points of Oil India Ltd.

Ms. Sarma began by addressing delays in boundary notifications for the Eco-Sensitive Zones (ESZs) of Dehing Patkai National Park and the Bherjan Borajan Podumoni Wildlife Sanctuary. These delays impact 113 and 412 exploration locations, respectively, creating significant operational backlogs.

She also emphasized the need to update the Know Your Approval (KYA) database in the Parivesh Portal. Specifically, she highlighted the importance of including Arunachal Pradesh's unclassified state forests to facilitate better planning and reduce project delays.

Pipeline Maintenance and Pre-1980 Infrastructure

A recurring challenge, Ms. Sarma noted, lies in the restrictive timelines for pipeline maintenance. She proposed extending the current three-month timeline to six months and called for exemptions from Forest Clearance (FC) and Wildlife Sanctuary (WLS) clearance requirements for pipelines that were installed before the enactment of the Forest Conservation Act (1980). This would ensure smoother operations while honoring existing infrastructure commitments.

Extended Reach Drilling and Operational Constraints

Reiterating Mr. Yamdo's proposal, Ms. Sarma passionately advocated for permitting ERD beneath Dibru Saikhowa National Park, a request that has thus far been declined due to the Supreme Court's directive prohibiting mining activities within 1 km of any Protected Area. She also highlighted the broader operational constraints faced by Oil India Ltd., where protracted clearance processes of 2–4 years leave insufficient time for exploration and production, further hampering progress.

Together, Mr. Yamdo's visionary outlook and Ms. Sarma's detailed analysis underscored the critical need for regulatory reforms that harmonize conservation with development. Their insights served as a rallying call to policymakers, urging them to consider innovative solutions and create a more enabling environment for India's oil and gas sector to thrive sustainably.



Mr. A.K. Mohanty
IFS, ADG (F), Ministry of
Environment, Forest, and
Climate Change (MoEF&CC)

1.3 Event Proceedings

Navigating Regulatory Challenges: Interactive Session with Mr. A.K. Mohanty, ADG (F), MoEF&CC

In a virtual yet deeply engaging session, Mr. A.K. Mohanty, ADG (F) at the Ministry of Environment, Forest, and Climate Change (MoEF&CC), addressed the complexities of balancing environmental regulations with the operational needs of the oil and gas sector. His speech highlighted the rich forest cover and extensive wildlife areas in the Northeast, reiterating the Ministry's commitment to resolving the sector's pressing issues. His remarks provided critical guidance to operators, along with actionable insights for navigating regulatory processes.

Streamlining Proposals Through Better Planning

Mr. Mohanty emphasized the importance of preparing precise KML files, advising operators to include all components of a project—such as boreholes and civil infrastructure—in their submissions. He explained that a well-defined KML file helps the Ministry assess clearance requirements more accurately and ensures faster proposal approvals.

He also stressed the importance of identifying and avoiding "No-Go" areas, particularly in Protected Areas like National Parks and Wildlife Sanctuaries, where mining is prohibited. Operators were encouraged to align proposals with existing guidelines, while the Directorate General of Hydrocarbons (DGH) was advised to delineate such areas within PML/PEL zones to prevent future roadblocks.

Addressing Operational Oversights

One recurring issue highlighted by Mr. Mohanty was the omission of approach roads in comprehensive project proposals. He reminded operators that approach roads are integral to project planning and must be included to avoid delays.

Regarding Extended Reach Drilling (ERD), he clarified that while it is exempt from forest clearances in general forest areas, it remains prohibited in Protected Areas due to the Supreme Court's directives against mining in such zones. He urged operators to adhere to these boundaries, though he acknowledged ongoing efforts to refine Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) for ERD to minimize environmental impact.

Interactive Q&A: Resolving Practical Concerns

The session transitioned into a lively Q&A, where delegates raised pertinent issues from their field experiences:

1. Drilling Operations at Night

Ms. Lily Chawang, GM, ONGC, highlighted the impracticality of the clause prohibiting drilling after sunset, as drilling is a continuous 24/7 operation. Mr. Mohanty acknowledged the concern and assured participants that the Ministry would review this condition for more feasible alternatives.

2. ERD for High-Potential Areas Near Forests

Mr. Tralukya Borgohain, Director (Operations), OIL, inquired about the feasibility of ERD in areas classified as high-prospect near forested zones. Mr. Mohanty confirmed that the Ministry is considering ERD as a viable solution due to its minimal surface impact, balancing conservation with energy exploration needs.

3. Encroachment Challenges in Diverted Forest Land

Mr. Sitanshu from ONGC Tripura flagged operational disruptions caused by encroachment on diverted forest land, despite obtaining all necessary clearances. Mr. Mohanty clarified that such issues fall under the purview of state governments and require their active intervention for resolution.

A Collaborative Path Forward

Mr. Mohanty's session exemplified the importance of collaboration between industry and regulators. His openness to revisiting restrictive conditions and exploring innovative solutions like ERD reinforced the Ministry's commitment to striking a balance between environmental stewardship and the nation's energy demands. Delegates left the session with a renewed sense of direction, armed with insights to refine their strategies and work in harmony with regulatory frameworks.



Mr. G.L. Das
Head of Environment,
Directorate General of
Hydrocarbons (DGH)

1.3 Event Proceedings

Accelerating Progress: Mr. G.L. Das Highlights Government of India's Efforts to Empower North East O&G Operators

Mr. G.L. Das, Head of Environment at the Directorate General of Hydrocarbons (DGH), delivered an enlightening presentation showcasing the Government of India's initiatives to fast-track statutory clearances for oil and gas exploration and production (E&P) activities in the resource-rich but regulatory-challenged Northeast. His address offered a glimpse into the proactive measures taken to simplify processes, foster collaboration, and boost operational efficiency for the region's O&G operators.

A Retrospective Boost for OALP Blocks

Mr. Das began by emphasizing a significant policy shift—providing a retrospective extension of up to two years for all awarded Open Acreage Licensing Policy (OALP) blocks. This step not only applies to past blocks but will also serve as a benchmark for future OALP bids. By granting operators more time to navigate regulatory and operational hurdles, this measure aims to unlock the full potential of exploration projects in the Northeast.

Establishment of the North East Coordination Committee (NECC)

Highlighting the importance of a unified approach, Mr. Das introduced the North East Coordination Committee (NECC), a platform designed to bring together stakeholders, streamline decision-making, and address region-specific challenges. The NECC serves as a bridge between operators and regulators, ensuring that projects move forward with minimal delays. Mr. Das credited Mr. J. Lahiri for this initiative during his tenure with the DGH.

Innovation through the Urja Pragati Portal

In a stride toward digital transformation, Mr. Das showcased the Urja Pragati Portal, an innovative online platform developed to enhance transparency and efficiency in the clearance process. The portal is designed to provide operators with real-time updates, streamline communication between stakeholders, and facilitate faster resolution of issues, setting a new standard for process automation in the sector.

Joint Workshops for Sensitization and Collaboration

Mr. Das also underscored the importance of knowledge-sharing initiatives, such as joint workshops organized by DGH. These workshops aim to sensitize operators and regulatory bodies alike, fostering mutual understanding and collaboration. By creating a forum for open dialogue, these sessions help address ambiguities in regulations and build stronger partnerships across the ecosystem.

Paving the Way for Energy Development

Through these strategic interventions, the Government of India is paving the way for a more dynamic and efficient oil and gas sector in the Northeast. Mr. Das's presentation not only outlined the steps already taken but also reflected a clear commitment to aligning regional energy development with national priorities. His insights left the audience optimistic about the region's potential to emerge as a powerhouse in India's energy landscape.



Dr. Vimal Kr. Hatwal
Member Secretary (Industry 2),
MoEF&CC, New Delhi

1.3 Event Proceedings

Navigating Evolving Regulations: Dr. Vimal Kr. Hatwal on Recent Advances in Environmental & Forest Laws

Dr. Vimal Kr. Hatwal, Member Secretary (Industry 2), MoEF&CC, New Delhi, delivered an insightful presentation on the recent advancements in environmental and forest laws, with a special focus on their implications for the oil, petroleum, and gas sector. His address provided clarity on key regulatory updates while emphasizing the importance of precision and compliance in navigating the statutory landscape.

Understanding the EIA Notification, 2006

Dr. Hatwal began by revisiting the cornerstone of India's environmental regulatory framework—the Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) Notification of 2006. He succinctly outlined its relevance and application to the oil and gas sector, reinforcing the necessity of adhering to its provisions for ensuring sustainable industrial operations.

The Role of KML Files in Environmental Clearances

Building on earlier remarks by Shri A.K. Mohanty, Dr. Hatwal shed light on a recurring challenge in the clearance process: the quality and accuracy of .kml files submitted by User Agencies (UA). He noted that a significant proportion of Environmental Data Sheets

(EDS) returned for revisions are due to inconsistencies or omissions in these files. These technical documents, he explained, are crucial for defining project parameters such as boreholes, infrastructure, and affected areas, enabling the Ministry to assess proposals with precision.

Improving Accuracy to Avoid Delays

Dr. Hatwal urged operators to prioritize accuracy when preparing .kml files, as these are fundamental to expediting the approval process. By aligning submissions with guidelines, UAs can not only minimize delays but also strengthen their compliance with environmental laws.

A Collaborative Vision for Progress

Through his presentation, Dr. Hatwal emphasized the Ministry's commitment to streamlining processes and resolving bottlenecks. His insights underscored the shared responsibility of operators and regulators to ensure environmental conservation while advancing India's energy goals. With a balanced approach to regulatory adherence and innovative problem-solving, the sector can achieve sustainable growth—a vision that resonated deeply with the audience.



Mr. J. Lahiri

General Secretary, Society for Petroleum Professionals (SPP)

1.3 Event Proceedings

Addressing the Core Challenges: Mr. J. Lahiri's Highlight Presentation on Environmental Regulations in O&G E&P Activities

One of the most impactful moments of the workshop, second only to the Panel Discussion, was the presentation by Mr. J. Lahiri, General Secretary of the Society for Petroleum Professionals (SPP). Mr. Lahiri delivered a comprehensive and impassioned overview of the pain points and regulatory hurdles faced by oil and gas Exploration and Production (E&P) activities in the Northeast region. His presentation was a deep dive into the complexities of navigating environmental regulations while underscoring the critical need for streamlined processes to unlock the region's vast hydrocarbon potential.

The Challenge of Extended Reach Drilling (ERD) in Protected Areas

Mr. Lahiri highlighted the rejection of key Forest Clearance (FC) proposals for ERD projects beneath Dibru-Saikhowa National Park in Assam and Trishna Wildlife Sanctuary in Tripura. Despite receiving prior approval from the Standing Committee of the National Board for Wildlife (SC-NBWL), these proposals were rejected under the Supreme Court's 2015 directive following the "Goa Foundation Case" judgment. This inconsistency, he argued, hampers progress and discourages innovative, low-impact drilling techniques.

Conflicts in Forest Conservation Rules

One of the focal points of his presentation was the shift in forest conservation policies, particularly the Van (Sanrakshan Evam Samvardhan) Rules of 2023. Changes such as the removal of regional office authority to approve exploration activities on forest areas up to 5 hectares and stricter wildlife permissions have increased the operational burden on oil and gas operators. He stressed that these changes are at odds with earlier provisions under the 2022 Forest Conservation Rules, which facilitated smoother operations.

Financial and Operational Barriers

Mr. Lahiri also drew attention to the financial burdens imposed on operators, such as the requirement to allocate 2% of the total project cost toward CAMPA funds for wildlife management plans. He pointed out that this calculation is disproportionately high for O&G projects since it includes non-forest components of the project

cost, unlike other industries. Additionally, he highlighted the impracticality of the new mandate for a 7.5-meter safety zone for each O&G proposal, given that oil and gas extraction differs significantly from conventional mining.

Pending Clearances and Strategic Energy Status

The presentation emphasized the prolonged delays in critical processes, including the validity of EIA reports and public hearing proceedings, which often lapse before statutory approvals are granted, taking 4–5 years in the Northeast. Draft notifications for Eco-Sensitive Zones (ESZs) in Assam and Arunachal Pradesh remain pending, further stalling progress. Mr. Lahiri proposed classifying O&G E&P projects near international borders as "Strategic Energy Projects of National Importance," echoing their crucial role in national security and energy self-reliance.

Environmental Commitments and Practical Concerns

While acknowledging the importance of green belt development and wildlife conservation, Mr. Lahiri questioned the feasibility of applying a 33% green belt mandate in exploratory drilling projects, especially those conducted entirely in forest lands. He also highlighted discrepancies in wildlife clearance approvals, where projects in ESZ areas are often treated on par with those inside Protected Areas, leading to undue regulatory scrutiny.

A Call for Reform

Mr. Lahiri's presentation was not only a detailed exposition of the pain points but also a rallying call for reform. He urged policymakers to address these systemic issues, citing the region's pivotal role in India's energy future. By harmonizing regulations with industry needs, the Northeast could become a cornerstone of the nation's hydrocarbon strategy while maintaining its environmental integrity.

The presentation left an indelible mark on the audience, sparking thought-provoking discussions and reinforcing the urgent need for actionable solutions to align environmental regulations with the energy sector's aspirations.

1.4

Panel Discussion

A Transformative Dialogue

Panel Discussion on Environmental Regulations for O&G in Northeast India

The panel discussion, chaired by Dr. Amandeep Garg, IAS, Additional Secretary, MoEF&CC, stood as the centrepiece of the workshop, weaving together perspectives from senior officials, regulatory experts, and policymakers. Joining Dr. Garg were Ms. Imtiena Ao, IFS, DDG (Central), RO, Shillong, Mr. Charan Jeet Singh, Scientist-E (FC), MoEF&CC, Shri P. Subramaniam, PCCF & HoFF, Arunachal Pradesh, and Shri Rabindra Kumar Samal, IFS, PCCF & HOFF, Tripura. Together, they addressed the multifaceted challenges faced by the oil and gas (O&G) sector in the Northeast while outlining actionable pathways to drive progress.



1.4 Panel Discussion

Balancing Energy Security and Environmental Stewardship

Dr. Garg opened the discussion by underscoring the delicate balance between national energy security and environmental sustainability. As the Northeast region is both a biodiversity hotspot and a vital hydrocarbon reserve, he emphasized the need for nuanced approaches to development that protect the region's ecological wealth while unlocking its economic potential.

Key Themes and Insights from the Discussion



1. Policy Reforms for Clearances

The panellists advocated for an integrated approach to streamline Environmental Clearance (EC) and Forest Clearance (FC) processes. Aligning these timelines, they argued, would significantly reduce delays that often span years, enabling faster project implementation.



2. Wildlife Clearance Delays

Delays in wildlife approvals were highlighted as a critical bottleneck. To address this, the panellists recommended regularizing Wildlife Board meetings to ensure projects receive timely evaluations and approvals.



3. Hydrocarbon Development in ESZs

The panel deliberated on the feasibility of permitting regulated hydrocarbon activities within Eco-Sensitive Zones (ESZs) of Protected Areas. With strict safety measures and monitoring mechanisms, such projects could strike a balance between environmental conservation and energy development.



4. Stakeholder Collaboration

Formal consultations with state governments and operators emerged as a key recommendation to tackle region-specific challenges. This collaborative framework could provide the foundation for sustainable and efficient project execution.

1.4 Panel Discussion



Expanded Recommendations and Technical Interventions

Technological Innovations

The panellists echoed earlier discussions on improving the quality of KML data submissions, ensuring proposals are robust, accurate, and aligned with regulatory requirements.

Strategic Project Prioritization

Projects near international borders or falling under BSF jurisdiction were recommended for classification as “Strategic Energy Projects of National Importance.” Such prioritization would facilitate expedited clearances, recognizing their critical role in national energy security.

Amendments to Forest Conservation Rules

The panel suggested amending the Van (Sanrakshan Evam Samvardhan) Rules, 2023 to incorporate provisions specific to O&G activities. This would address industry-specific needs while maintaining environmental safeguards.

EIA Validity Extensions

Given the lengthy approval processes in the Northeast, the panel recommended increasing the validity of EIA

reports and public hearing proceedings from 3 to 5 years, providing operators with greater flexibility.

Exemptions for Legacy Pipelines

A call was made for FC exemptions for pipelines and infrastructure installed prior to the enactment of the Forest Conservation Act (1980), reducing unnecessary operational delays for pre-existing projects.

Site-Specific ESZ Notifications

The need to expedite ESZ notifications for Assam and Arunachal Pradesh—pending for over a decade—was underscored as a priority.

Uniform B2 Category EC Approval SOPs

The panel recommended adopting a uniform Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) for granting B2 category EC approvals across all states. The SOP implemented in Assam in 2021, which achieves approvals within 45 days, was proposed as a model for replication.

1.4 Panel Discussion

Tackling Long-Standing Challenges

Legacy Legal and Operational Hurdles

From unresolved encroachments on forest lands in Arunachal Pradesh to prolonged FC violation cases despite compliance, the panel brought to light long-standing issues that need urgent resolution. Proposals to send inspection teams from the Ministry to verify ground realities were floated as a potential way to address these issues comprehensively.

Wildlife Clearance Guidelines

The panellists proposed reinstating the ministry's 2014 guidelines, which differentiated ESZ projects from those within Protected Areas. A separate application process for ESZ wildlife clearance approvals was also suggested to reduce redundancy and confusion.

Green Belt Mandates and Feasibility

The requirement for 33% green belt development in exploratory drilling projects was deemed impractical and unnecessary. The panel recommended limiting this condition to permanent production installations.

Validity of Environmental Clearances

The panel discussed aligning the validity of ECs with the production lease (PML) period, which typically spans 20 years, compared to the current EC validity of 10 years with a one-year extension provision.

A Call for Strategic Action



Stakeholder Consultations

Reflecting on past successes, the panel recommended conducting stakeholder consultations before implementing major regulatory changes. Collaborative discussions involving operators, regulatory bodies, and state authorities could mitigate conflicts and foster a shared vision for progress.



Inspection Teams and Ground-Level Assessments

Drawing from previous Ministry-led inspections in 2019, the panel proposed forming teams to conduct site visits in key locations such as Upper Assam and Arunachal Pradesh. These visits would provide valuable insights to shape future policy reforms.

1.4 Panel Discussion

A Roadmap for Progress

The panel discussion served as a powerful culmination of the workshop, offering a comprehensive roadmap for addressing the O&G sector's regulatory challenges. From policy reforms to practical recommendations, the session reaffirmed the commitment of all stakeholders to achieving sustainable development in the Northeast. As Dr. Garg aptly put it, "Our energy security lies in harmony with our environment—a future we must build together."



1.5

Conclusion and Vote of Thanks



Charting the Path Forward: Concluding Remarks by Dr. Amandeep Garg

As the workshop drew to a close, the Chief Guest, Dr. Amandeep Garg, IAS, delivered a powerful and inspiring conclusion, leaving the audience with a clear call to action. With a deep understanding of the challenges and opportunities presented throughout the day, Dr. Garg emphasized the importance of collective responsibility in addressing the bottlenecks faced by the hydrocarbon sector, particularly in the ecologically rich yet resource-critical Northeast region.

Dr. Garg reminded participants that the road to energy security is one that requires balance—aligning industrial growth with environmental stewardship. “The success of our hydrocarbon exploration efforts,” he remarked, “lies not just in technical innovation or policy reforms, but in our ability to collaborate effectively, respecting both nature and national priorities.”

He reiterated the importance of the insights and recommendations discussed during the workshop,

from streamlining clearances and fostering stakeholder collaboration to integrating sustainable practices and leveraging advanced technologies like Extended Reach Drilling (ERD). Dr. Garg also highlighted the Northeast’s strategic role in India’s energy future, calling for a united effort to unlock its potential while safeguarding its unique ecological heritage.

In closing, he urged the participants—regulators, industry leaders, and policymakers alike—to move forward with purpose and determination. “The challenges are many, but so are the solutions we’ve explored today. Together, we can forge a pathway that not only meets our energy needs but also preserves the natural legacy of this remarkable region for generations to come.”

With those stirring words, Dr. Garg encapsulated the workshop’s core vision—progress through partnership, innovation, and a steadfast commitment to sustainability.



Ms. L.J Syiemiong

Member Secretary (Industry 2),
MoEF&CC, New Delhi

The workshop ended with a vote of thanks by Smti. L.J. Syiemiong, IFS, DIG(F), RO, MoEF&CC, Shillong

Smt L.J.Syiemiong expressed her gratitude to Dr Amandeep Garg, IAS, Additional Secretary, MoEF&CC for taking all the pain for joining the workshop starting from Delhi in early morning and landing Guwahati in the afternoon due to bad weather and straight from Airport coming directly to workshop and joined Post Lunch session through VC while travelling by road from Guwahati to Shillong prior to arrival to Auditorium.

Smt. Syiemiong thanked Ms.Imtienla Ao, IFS, DDG(C), RO, MoEF&CC, Shillong, who started the ball rolling with her welcome address and called all Oil & Gas Operators not as User Agencies rather to become partners for the way forward journey for EODB in O&G sector.

She also thanked the dignitaries for making the morning inaugural session colorful with their presence, viz: Shri P. Subramaniam, IFS, PCCF & HoFF, Govt of Arunachal Pradesh, Shri Rabindra Kumar Samal, IFS, PCCF & HoFF, Tripura, Mr Tam Ngilyang, IFS, Chief Wildlife Warden, Arunachal Pradesh, Ms V. Soreiphi, IFS, Additional PCCF, Manipur, Shri D. Sathiyam, IFS, Additional PCCF, Meghalaya, Dr. K. Sasikumar, IFS, Chairman, Tripura, SPCB, Shri Saloma Yomdo, Director (E&D), OIL, Shri Trailukya Borgohain, Director (Operations), OIL and Shri Yash Malik, President of Society for Petroleum Professionals (SPP) .

Smt Syiemiong thanked Mr A.K.Mohanty, IFS, ADG (Forests), MoEF&CC for joining the workshop through VC during the inaugural session and addressing the house and replying various queries raised by the Operators

She thanked all the Central, State Govt officials, representatives of DGH, members from Oil & Gas companies, Hydrocarbon professionals of DGH, who took all pain in joining the 2nd edition of NE Regional workshop in spite of all of their busy schedules. She specially thanked Dr Vimal Hatwal, Member Secretary, EAC(Ind-2), MoEF&CC, Dr. Bishu Karmakar, Member Secretary, Tripura, SPCB, Dr Shantunu Dutta, Member Secretary, Assam PCB, Shri Jatindra Sarma, IFS (Retd), Chairman, SEAC, Assam, Dr. Jaideep Baruah, Director, ASTEC, Shri Rajendra G Garwad, IFS, Nodal Officer (FCA), GoA, Shri Manish Jha, IFS, DCF, Arunachal Pradesh and Dr J.S.Sharma, Member, EAC (Ind-2), MoEF&CC.

Smt Syiemiong also thanked Mr Bhaskar Phukan, MD, NRL and Shri Charanjeet Singh, Scientist D (FC), MoEF&CC for joining the workshop during Post Lunch session.

By quoting that "Necessity is the mother of all Inventions", she told that this 2nd edition of workshop has been planned to bring changes in the environmental regulations, much of which didn't happen against recommendations after the 1st edition of workshop held on 21.10.2019. She thanked all experts/ Delegates for their active participation during the session proceedings.

She also thanked the following speakers for their fruitful deliberations:

- Shri Yash Malik, President, SPP for introducing the Society with its aim and objectives
- Shri Tarun Kumar Mathuria, ED(BM), ONGC, Jorhat for highlighting the ONGC's pain point issues while undertaking E&P activities in NER
- Shri Saloma Yomdo, Director (E&D), OIL for his thought provoking address
- Smt Mallika Baruah Sarma, ED (HSE & ESG), OIL, Duliajan for highlighting the OIL's pain point issues while undertaking E&P activities in NER
- Shri Gada Lal Das, Head (Env), DGH for apprising the house about the various steps taken by Gol to facilitate the E&P Operators of NER for fast tracking their clearances
- Dr Vimal Hatwal, Member Secretary (EAC-Ind-2), MoEF&CC explained the various reforms made by the Ministry for faster grant of Environment Clearances for O&G sector under provision of EIA Notification, 2006. Dr Hatwal also informed the house that, Ministry is adopting AI Tools in PARIVESH-2.0 portal for granting Environment Clearances
- Shri J.Lahiri, General Secretary, SPP, during his presentation expressed his deep gratitude very beginning to Dr Amandeep Garg, IAS, Additional Secretary, MoEF&CC for accepting the request for gracing the occasion as Chief Guest and Ms. Imtienla Ao, IFS, DDG(C), RO, MoEF&CC, Shillong for her support for holding the 2nd edition of the workshop, which kept on differing starting from 6th October, 2023, then to 2nd August, 2024, 21st August, 2024 followed with tentatively in October, 2024/ November, 2024 and finally happening on

23rd January, 2025. Shri Lahiri presented EC/FC/Wildlife Clearance related pain point issues for O&G sector for needful consideration by the Ministry for necessary modification in the regulations within the ambit of prevailing Act and Rules thereof.

Smt Syiemiong thanked all the Panel members for their lively deliberations during the Open Discussion sessions under Chairmanship of Dr Amandeep Garg, IAS, Additional Secretary, MoEF&CC and moderated by Ms. Imtiena Ao, IFS, DDG(C), RO, MoEF&CC, Shillong in attendance of Panel members- Shri P. Subramaniam, IFS, PCCF & HoFF, Govt of Arunachal Pradesh, Shri

Rabindra Kumar Samal, IFS, PCCF & HoFF, Tripura, Ms V. Sorejphi, IFS, Additional PCCF, Manipur, Dr. K. Sasikumar, IFS, Chairman, Tripura, SPCB, Dr Vimal Hatwal, Member Secretary (EAC-Ind-2), MoEF&CC and Shri Charanjeet Singh, Scientist D (FC), MoEF&CC.

She lastly thanked Social Friendly Management for the beautiful "Musical Theme" made by them for the workshop and making the documentary film titled "North East- The Birth Place of Indian Petroleum Industry". She also praised Social Friendly for executing the workshop in a flawless manner.





2.0

Key Takeaways and Actionable Outcomes

Key Takeaways from the Workshop

Balance Between Energy Security and Environmental Sustainability

The workshop highlighted the critical need to harmonize India's hydrocarbon exploration with ecological preservation, particularly in the biodiversity-rich Northeast.

Importance of Stakeholder Collaboration

Effective coordination between regulatory agencies, state governments, and operators was emphasized as a key to overcoming region-specific challenges.

Challenges in Statutory Clearances

Prolonged timelines for Environmental (EC), Forest (FC), and Wildlife Clearances (WLC) continue to be major bottlenecks, impacting project timelines and viability.

Role of Advanced Technologies

Technologies like Extended Reach Drilling (ERD) were recognized as vital tools for minimizing surface impact while enabling exploration in sensitive areas.

Policy Reforms Needed for O&G Sector

Several outdated regulations, including the Van (Sanrakshan Evam Samvardhan) Rules, 2023, and EC validity periods, were identified as requiring amendments to accommodate the unique needs of oil and gas projects.

Eco-Sensitive Zone (ESZ) Notifications

Pending ESZ notifications in Assam and Arunachal Pradesh are stalling projects, underscoring the need for expedited finalizations.

Strategic Energy Projects Near International Borders

Projects close to international borders were proposed for classification as "Strategic Energy Projects of National Importance" to prioritize their approval.

Improving KML Data Submissions

The accuracy of KML files was highlighted as crucial for reducing delays in the clearance process and ensuring faster approvals.

Financial and Operational Bottlenecks

CAMPA fund allocations, green belt mandates, and changes in consent fee structures were noted as adding undue financial strain to operators.

Workshops and Knowledge Sharing

Regular joint workshops were proposed as essential platforms for fostering mutual understanding and refining regulatory processes.

Actionable Outcomes from the Workshop

Streamline EC and FC Approvals

Integrate and align timelines for EC and FC processes to reduce delays and provide operators with predictable approval pathways.

Expedite Pending ESZ Notifications

Prioritize finalizing site-specific ESZ notifications for Assam and Arunachal Pradesh to unlock stalled projects.

Amend Forest Conservation Rules

Introduce O&G-specific provisions in the Van (Sanrakshan Evam Samvardhan) Rules, 2023 to simplify clearance requirements for exploration and production activities.

Revisit Wildlife Clearance Guidelines

Develop separate application forms and approval processes for projects in ESZ areas, differentiating them from projects inside Protected Areas.

Extend EIA and EC Validity Periods

Increase the validity of EIA reports and public hearing proceedings from 3 to 5 years and align EC validity with the PML period (20 years).

Improve KML Data Standards

Establish a standardized format and provide training to operators on preparing precise KML files to ensure faster processing of clearance proposals.

Facilitate Strategic Energy Projects

Classify O&G projects near international borders as "Strategic Energy Projects of National Importance" to expedite clearances and approvals.

Revise Financial Obligations

Redefine CAMPA fund contributions based on the proportionate forest land involved rather than the total project cost to reduce financial burdens.

Standardize B2 Category EC Approvals

Adopt the Assam SOP for B2 category EC approvals across all states, ensuring approvals are granted within 45 days.



Form Ministry Inspection Teams

Organize ground-level inspection visits by MoEF&CC teams to assess challenges and impacts in key oilfields, enabling data-driven policy adjustments.



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