

Upper Ganga No-Dam Consensus: Why the Centre Opposes New Hydropower Projects

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Upper Ganga No-Dam Consensus Latest News

- The Union Government has informed the Supreme Court that it does not support new hydroelectric projects on the **Alaknanda** and **Bhagirathi rivers**, the main headstreams of the Ganga, marking a significant policy shift.
- The issue gained prominence after the 2013 Kedarnath disaster, following which the Supreme Court ordered a review of existing and proposed hydropower projects in Uttarakhand and halted fresh environmental and forest clearances.
- The government's current unified position comes after more than a decade of internal disagreements, balancing Uttarakhand's economic interests, the need to preserve ecological flow in the Ganga, and concerns over the fragile Himalayan ecosystem.

Committees, Reviews and Policy Deadlock

- Following the Supreme Court's 2013 order, the Environment Ministry set up an expert panel led by **Ravi Chopra** to assess whether hydropower projects worsened the Kedarnath disaster and threatened biodiversity in the upper Ganga basin.
- The committee concluded that 23 of 24 proposed hydroelectric projects would harm biodiversity, a view supported by the Environment Ministry.

Institutional Disagreement

- The Central Electricity Authority (CEA) and **Central Water Commission** (CWC) opposed this conclusion, arguing that hydropower had a minimal ecological footprint and was not linked to the 2013 disaster.
- Meanwhile, project developers approached the Supreme Court seeking removal of the clearance freeze.

Second Expert Committee (EB-II)

- In 2015, the Supreme Court directed the formation of a second panel under B.P. Das to examine:
 - Cumulative environmental impact
 - Carrying capacity of the Ganga basin
 - Glacial movement and seismic risks
 - Socio-economic implications

Continued Policy Deadlock

- EB-II initially cleared the six disputed projects. However, internal differences emerged between the Environment Ministry, Jal Shakti Ministry, and Power Ministry, delaying a final decision.
- In its broader review of 70 hydropower projects, EB-II found:
 - 19 already operational
 - Recommended 28 of the remaining 51 projects
- However, the Jal Shakti Ministry opposed these recommendations in 2019, prolonging the deadlock.
- In 2021, the Centre adopted a compromise position, supporting only seven projects that were already substantially completed or had advanced financial investments.

Revisiting Hydropower Assessments in Upper Ganga

- In 2024, the Supreme Court directed a committee headed by **Cabinet Secretary T.V. Somanathan** to reconsider the recommendations of the EB-II, stating that if the Centre rejected them, it must provide clear reasons.
- After consulting the Uttarakhand government, central ministries, and civil society, the committee recommended only five hydropower projects:
 - Bowala Nandprayag
 - Devsari
 - Bhyundar Ganga
 - Jhalakoti
 - Urgam-II

Key Concerns Considered

- **Disaster Vulnerability** – The committee flagged the threat from glacial lake outburst floods (GLOFs), citing the 2023 Sikkim disaster as evidence of severe downstream risks.
- **Ecological Impact** – Projects with significant ecological consequences were excluded from consideration.

Centre's Final Position

- In January 2026, the Supreme Court gave the Centre three months for a final decision.
- The government ultimately argued against new hydropower projects, describing the Alaknanda and Bhagirathi basins as unique ('sui generis') due to their ecological, geological, and cultural significance.

Evidence of Fragility

- The Centre cited recent disasters such as:
 - 2021 Rishi Ganga floods
 - Joshimath flash floods
 - Land subsidence in Joshimath
- It also highlighted the region's rich ecological sensitivity, including:
 - Nanda Devi National Park
 - Valley of Flowers National Park
 - Gangotri National Park
 - Kedarnath Wildlife Sanctuary
 - Bhagirathi Eco-Sensitive Zone

Conclusion

- The Centre's evolving stance on hydropower projects in the upper Ganga reflects a broader shift from development-first thinking to ecological caution in fragile Himalayan regions.
- The long policy journey underscores the challenge of balancing energy needs, economic interests, and environmental sustainability.
- As climate risks intensify and disasters become more frequent, the upper Ganga may emerge as a defining test case for environmentally responsible infrastructure planning in India.

Source: **IE**

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