

# Hubballi-Ankola railway line gets clearance despite opposition

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Steamrolling opposition to the Hubballi-Ankola railway line, Chief Minister B.S. Yediyurappa cleared the controversial project at the State Wildlife Board meeting convened in Bengaluru on Friday.

Intriguingly, the Board meeting was convened for the second time in less than two weeks after the project faced vehement opposition from some of its members in the March 9 meeting.

## Politicians united

What is more, leaders from across the political spectrum, including Congress leader R.V. Deshpande and Minister Jagadish Shettar, attended the Friday's meeting and argued in favour of the project.

Though the project entails felling and destruction of nearly 2 lakh fully grown trees and destruction of forest, Forest Minister B.S. Anand Singh was absent.

Also, some of the senior bureaucrats not connected with wildlife and environment were present, according to sources.

In the meeting held last week, Mr. Yediyurappa preferred to put off the subject without taking a call on it having sensed the opposition to it. But within 10 days, the board meeting was convened again and has now received official clearance despite opposition from a few members present.

Sources told *The Hindu* that the Chief Minister overruled various reports filed by environmental experts, including a comprehensive report filed by the National Tiger Conservation Authority (NTCA) representatives that the project was inimical to environment and the perceived economic gains would be neutralised by the immense environmental devastation.

The Chief Minister and the officials supportive of the project depended heavily on a report submitted by a scientist from Indian Institute of Science. But even senior Forest Department officials have dismissed the mitigation measures suggested by the IISc. scientist as highly impractical and unrealistic.

## Over to NBW

The issue and the State Board's decision will now go before the National Board for Wildlife. The project entails felling nearly 2 lakh trees to lay a 164.44-km length railway line whose benefits too are questionable, according to environmentalists.

The alignment of the tracks is between Kali Tiger Reserve and Bedthi Conservation Reserve and more than 80% of the line cuts through Western Ghats. It requires diversion of 727 hectares of pristine forests for a line which could become redundant owing to depletion in mining activity.

According to an NTCA report on the project, the forests through which the railway line cuts, supports 29 species of mammals, 256 species of birds, 8 species of reptiles, and 50 species of butterflies. Majority of the mammals are in the IUCN red list and also protected under the Wildlife Conservation Act 1972.