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Scientists are in favour of Hubli-Ankola railway line

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The controversial Hubli-Ankola railway line, which has been seen as a threshold for the development of North Karnataka region, is now torn between the pro-railway and pro highway activists. The environment issues appear to be on the backburner.

The scientific team from the Centre for Environmental Sciences (CES), Indian Institute of Science, has given 'encouraging report' in favour of the Hubli Ankola railway line, which is seen as a panacea for the development of North Karnataka for the past 20 years.

This is the only line that has not been commissioned despite prime minister AB Vajpayee laying the foundation stone ten years back.

Now, the CES team that conducted the scientific survey has said that it was possible to lay the line with minimum impact on environment and wildlife. The team, which held a public hearing, on the line in Bangalore on Tuesday opined that the railway line was better than having a four-lane highway between Hubli and Ankola, as the highway will use up more than 20 times the forest area than used by the railway line.

The CES expert team, headed by TV Ramachandran, had visited the area about 45 days back. "The damage to the environment in terms of destruction of trees, wildlife corridor, and sub-terrain water veins can be minimised by using modern techniques of construction since, in most of the distance in the environmentally sensitive areas, the railway line would pass through tunnels, there would be no danger of cutting across the wildlife corridor or destruction of trees," said scientist VN Nayak of Uttara Kannada Vijnana Kendra at Karwar.

He said that the issues that came up for public hearing in Bangalore revolved mostly around the environmental aspects, but the antagonists of the railway line had forgotten the environmental damage the four-lane highway would inflict in the region.

"The savings on fuel and environmental damage caused by the exhaust of the thousands of vehicles passing on the highway was far more damaging than the fuel used and pollution created by railway engines. Since the highway would be nothing less than 100 metres wide and not less than 180 km between Ankola and Hubli, the wildlife corridors will be permanently severed and forests cannot be regenerated in the area."

Social scientists have also supported the railway line. Keshav Rao Sirsikar opined that the railway line will connect North Karnataka with coastal areas and become a mass transit option to the people of underdeveloped areas between Ankola and Hubli. The environmental groups, however, appear to be supporting the highway, which has been dubbed as insensitive and foolish by railway users.

"All environmentalists appear to have come from Sirsi. The politicians there are working hand in glove with the road transport lobby and they will never allow this railway line to materialise. The politicians there have already started working towards making Sirsi the district headquarters or even bifurcate the Uttar Kannada district by creating Shikaripur district. So we have no faith in the environmentalists from Sirsi," said railway activists at Ankola and Honnavar.

MPs from this region, Prahlad Joshi and Ananth Kumar Hegde, have supported the railway line.

"I've given the views of MPs from this region to the Union minister for environment and forests, Jayanthi Natarajan. She promised to clear the Hubli-Ankola line along with other four railway lines that were pending," Muniyappa said. Former member of Uttara Kannada zilla panchayat from Ankola Ramananda Nayak who has led a ten-year long struggle demanding the railway line, said, "We trust scientists from the CES than the environmentalists from Sirsi as their intentions were not

clear.”

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