



Endangered Rare Great Indian Bustard threatened by green energy

The Great Indian Bustard's final territories are prime renewables terrain

Bustard habitats in Rajasthan and Gujarat



A gravely endangered Indian bird is facing a renewed threat to its habitat as clean energy groups look to develop a sun-soaked expanse of desert to respond to the country's rising need for green power.

The Great Indian Bustard was almost hunted to extinction for its meat — prized as an aphrodisiac — before modern pesticides and habitat destruction drove it further to the brink. Barely 100 remain in the wild.

Now India's Supreme Court is expected to weaken a ban on building overhead transmission lines in one of the bird's last habitats, after a dispute that has pitted conservationists against some of corporate India's biggest names. The court imposed the ban in 2021 across more than 100,000 sq km of arid land, largely in the north-western state of Rajasthan, to protect the poor-sighted bird, one of the world's heaviest.

But with an estimated 45 gigawatts of wind and solar energy potential in the area, India's government and renewable companies have argued that the court's order to lay cables underground would be too expensive.

India's government also argued that the ban would prevent the country from hitting its target of 500GW of renewable energy capacity by 2030.

The court has set up a new committee of conservation experts and officials to look again at the issue. It would consider the "dynamic interplay between protecting a critically endangered species and addressing the

pressing global challenge of climate change", it said in March.

The expected rethink shows the compromises that India is contemplating over conservation and the environment as it tries to hit its renewable energy and economic goals.

The ban "was really blocking out a large swath of Rajasthan, which was not good for the country as a whole", said Sumant Sinha, chief executive of ReNew, one of India's largest green energy firms. "It was really one of those ecology versus climate-environment trade offs."

The committee appointed by the court is due to report back before a hearing in August but the court has said the previous blanket requirement for cables to be laid underground "would need recalibration".

As a result, it is expected to relax restrictions across roughly 80,000 sq km of "potential" bustard area. It is also considering what to do about a smaller "priority" habitat.

Companies and lobby groups are calling the rethink a victory.

"We expect them to be lenient," said Praveen Golash, joint secretary of the Sustainable Projects Developers Association, which counts companies including Adani Group, ReNew and Tata among its members.

But MK Ranjitsinh, a former wildlife official and petitioner in the case, called the court's ruling "a setback for conservation . . . if the Indian bustard goes extinct, I would contend that it was driven to extinction". He added

In peril: a critically endangered Great Indian Bustard rescued in the Barmer district of Rajasthan

Shaukat Ahmed/ANI via Reuters

that "we [conservationists] are all for alternative energy", but said power companies were avoiding underground transmission because of its high cost.

Golash said such methods were globally untested and likely to be impractical in a vast, remote desert.

One Mumbai-based energy analyst also said: "To put in high voltage underground cables is almost impossible and crazy expensive . . . I don't think it has been done anywhere in the world over a big distance."

Companies say they have already kitted up existing power lines with colourful devices designed to scare away birds and are making efforts to protect remaining bustards.

The National Solar Energy Federation of India, which also represents big power companies, is looking to establish a fund for bustard rehabilitation.

"We relate ourselves to the cause," it said. "As an industry we don't want the bird to be extinct, so we will do everything in our capacity to ensure that power lines, solar and wind are not responsible for it."

Chris Kay, Mumbai, and Benjamin Parkin, New Delhi