

Nath proposes new circuitous route to avoid Pench tiger reserve.

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ROAD transport and highways minister Kamal Nath has finally proposed an alternative route that circumvents the Pench Tiger Reserve to complete the North-South corridor. Earlier, his ministry had suggested widening an existing 18-metre road passing through the reserve, but this was opposed by the environment ministry because it endangered the tigers' natural habitat in Pench.

The project hit a legal hurdle with the Supreme Court asking its Central Empowered Committee to study the proposal. The CEC had recommended that

widening of the road to 30 metres should be avoided at all cost. The new route that Nath's ministry has proposed entails an additional investment of Rs 650 crore and it passes through his constituency Chhindwara, Seoni, Multai, Narsinghpur and Amarawada.

The road ministry has just filed an affidavit suggesting the new route with the Supreme Court. The apex court will study it. A Bench had earlier asked officials of the two ministries to thrash out the differences and present a composite plan.

Government officials said the new route is proposed to leave the Pench Tiger Reserve untouched and would pass through Multai-Chhindwara-Seoni (Na-

tional Highway 69A) and Narsinghpur-Amarawada-Chhindwara (NH 26B). The total cost for multi-laning the single-lane road is estimated to be Rs 1,575 crore now, and is likely to be awarded as an EPC project. About Rs 776 crore will be made available from the resources of the present Five-Year Plan. The ministry will soon approach the Public Investment Board with the fresh proposal.

"The new route will not only protect the reserve but also serve as a vehicle for economic development of the region. It has been charted out in a way so as to address the concerns of the CEC set up to take a look into the issue," a government official said.