

# Public to get more say in state projects

## *Agency to ensure EIA specifications are met*

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The public will be allowed a much bigger say in state development projects, which will also face tougher scrutiny from a new agency, Natural Resources and Environment Minister Praphat Panyachartrak has announced.

Mr Praphat said the two initiatives were among eight core issues that had been included in a ministry draft aimed at improving the process of environmental impact assessment (EIA) studies.

He said current procedures were outdated and created an atmosphere of distrust.

"We need to update EIAs to catch up with the rapid economic growth," he told environmental officials and industry representatives at the start of a two-day seminar.

Mr Praphat said his major concern was raising the level of public participation.

In the past, villagers were largely kept in the dark about state development projects near their communities, he said.

But under a new set of regulations governing EIAs, the public would be allowed to take part in "every step" of the study, said ministerial assistant Prinya Nutalaya, who was among a number of experts assigned to improve EIA procedures.

Mr Prinya said the public would be asked to suggest issues to be covered in EIAs, comment on final reports and participate in surveillance teams monitoring the projects.

"Public participation will prolong the procedure, but it's better for some projects to move ahead slowly," he said, citing the government's eagerness to push on with the construction of two coal-fired power plants in Prachuap Khiri Khan and the Thai-Malaysian gas pipeline, all of which drew fierce opposition from villagers.

An EIA prepared for one of the power plants failed to identify coral reefs that would be affected by the project, while a report on the gas pipeline gave inadequate weight to the social impact.

Mr Prinya said locally elected Tambon Administration Organisations would decide which projects were acceptable.

As a result, many projects would likely fail to gain approval, he said.

Projects that were approved by TAOs and appointed experts would be monitored by an environmental agency, which would ensure the conditions of EIAs were met.

The new agency would provide assistance to the Office of Environmental Policy and Planning, which was facing staff shortages, with only 60 officials handling up to 500 projects.

Draft EIA procedures would be tabled at public hearings before being considered by the National Environment Board in April.