

Rare earth project will endanger water supply - Penang water chief

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The approval of largescale mining permits in Ulu Muda will jeopardise water supply in three northern Malaysian states covering 4.2 million people, said Penang water supply board (PBAPP) CEO Jaseni Maidinsa.

He was referring to Kedah Menteri Besar Muhammad Sanusi Md Nor's announcement that the state had allowed a company to explore large-scale mining of "rare earth elements" (REE) in Ulu Muda, Sik, and Baling.

Jaseni (above) called for the venture to be stopped immediately.

"The Ministry of Environment and Water (Kasa), the Ministry of Natural Resources and Energy (NRE), and the National Security Council (MKN) must work together to stop this dangerous venture immediately.

"The Kedah Menteri Besar has conveniently forgotten that Ulu Muda is the largest and most important water catchment area in the Northern Corridor Economic Region (NCER)," he said in a statement today.

Jaseni said large-scale mining operations in the 163,000-hectare Greater Ulu Muda forest complex will involve land clearing wherever the minerals are found.

"The fallout from cutting down trees, flattening hills, establishing huge quarries, and digging into the earth will be the monumental destruction of the rainforest environment," he said.

Mining will also adversely affect Sungai Muda, a strategic raw water resource, he added.

Jaseni explained that rare earth mining will endanger water supply security in Perlis, Kedah, and Penang as there is no way to conduct large-scale mining enterprises in Ulu Muda without decimating rainforests that catch rainwater which then flows into Sungai Muda as raw water.

"In this sense, Ulu Muda is the first link in the NCER water supply value-chain that meets the water needs of the people and businesses in Perlis, Kedah, and Penang.

"About 70 percent of Perlis' raw water and 96 percent of Kedah's raw water originates from Ulu Muda. More than 80 percent of the raw water that PBAPP extracts daily from Sungai Muda, at the Lahar Tiang Intake in Penang, originates from Ulu Muda," he said.



Jaseni said consequences would be catastrophic if the project was pursued as Ulu Muda simply could not continue to function as a primary natural water catchment area for the three NCER states if its rainforests are cut down, its hills flattened, and its landscape scarred by mining operations.

He said the potential damage of such a project is likely to be permanent.

"Mining REE in Ulu Muda will inevitably put water supply services for the three states in peril.

"Thousands of businesses seeking to survive and revive their operations during this Covid-19 global pandemic will be burdened with unnecessary risks," he added.

"Therefore KASA, NRE, and MKN must ensure that Kedah does not jeopardise the water supply security of the NCER states of Perlis, Kedah, and Penang, which contributes about RM147.8 billion in 2019 and the livelihood of 4.2 million people," he said.