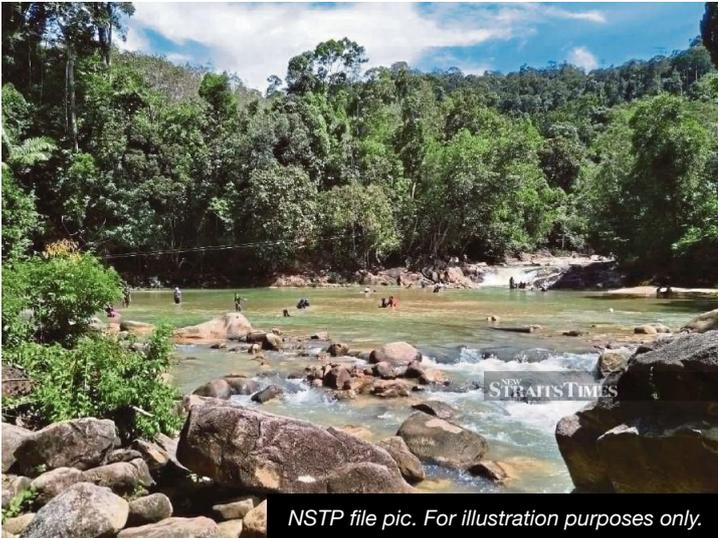


Rare earth mining a threat to water supply security in northern states



By Marina Emmanuel - December 7, 2020 @ 4:05pm



NSTP file pic. For illustration purposes only.

GEORGE TOWN: The Kedah menteri besar's approval of large-scale mining permits in Ulu Muda will jeopardise water supply in three northern states and will affect a combined population of 4.2 million people.

Perbadanan Bekalan Air Pulau Pinang Sdn Bhd (PBAPP) and PBA Holdings Bhd chief executive officer Datuk Jaseni Maidinsa today cautioned that large-scale mining operations in the 163,000ha Greater Ulu Muda Forest Complex would involve massive land clearing wherever the minerals were found.

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

"Mining will also adversely affect Sungai Muda, a strategic raw water resource, and rare earth mining will endanger the water supply security in Perlis, Kedah and Penang," he said in a statement.

Jaseni was referring to a Dec 2 report where Kedah Menteri Besar Muhammad Sanusi Md Nor had said that his state administration had approved a permit for a company to explore large-scale mining of minerals referred to as "rare earth elements" (REE) in Ulu Muda, Sik and Baling.

Jaseni urged the Environment and Water and the Natural Resources and Energy ministries, as well as the National Security Council to jointly stop what he described as a "dangerous venture" immediately.

"The Kedah menteri besar," said Jaseni, "has conveniently forgotten that Ulu Muda is the largest and most important water catchment area in the Northern Corridor Economic Region (NCER)." The NCER encompasses the states of Perlis, Kedah, Penang and Perak.

Jaseni said it was not possible for large-scale mining enterprises in Ulu Muda to be carried out without decimating rainforests that catch rainwater flowing 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 per cent of Perlis' raw water and 96 per cent of Kedah's raw water originate from Ulu Muda. Over 80 per cent of the raw water that PBAPP extracts daily from Sungai Muda, at the Lahar Tiang Intake in Penang, originates from Ulu Muda.

"Ulu Muda cannot continue to function as a primary natural water catchment area for three NCER states if its rainforests are cut down, its hills are flattened and its landscape is scarred by mining operations," Jaseni said, adding that the potential damage was likely to be permanent.

He also said that thousands of businesses seeking to survive and revive their operations during the Covid-19 global pandemic would be burdened with unnecessary risks. "In the case of large-scale mining, the threat is not limited to a shortage of raw water from Ulu Muda. The quality of the raw water from this river will also be compromised," he said, adding that that large-scale mining operations would generate large amounts of toxic waste, debris and polluted earth.