

Penang water authority decries ‘replacement forests’ offer by Kedah to loggers

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A Sahabat Alam Malaysia picture of the forests surrounding Pedu Dam, Kedah, in 2016. The Ulu Muda forests serve as a water catchment area not just for Kedah but also Penang and Perlis.

GEORGE TOWN: The Penang Water Supply Corporation (PBA) today criticised the plan by Kedah to consider offering logging companies “replacement” forests to harvest instead of paying them RM1.5 billion compensation for withdrawing their concessions.

The corporation’s CEO, Jaseni Maidinsa, said the proposal was “irresponsible and short-sighted” as it would lead to the Ulu Muda Forest Reserve being plundered further and cause water shortage in Perlis, Kedah and Penang in the long run.

The forest is an important water catchment for the three northern states with a total population of 4.2 million people.

“The federal government and Perlis and Penang state governments, the National Water Services Commission, padi farmers and NGOs should say no to the reopening of logging concessions in Kedah,” Jaseni said in a statement.

Earlier this week, the Kedah government said it would consider a proposal by the Forestry Department to offer replacement forests to loggers in lieu of the loss of harvest caused by gazetting a part of the forest as a water catchment area.

Jaseni said a parliamentary reply on Nov 4 last year showed that only 10.2% of the Ulu Muda Forest Reserve had been classified as a water catchment area, while another 6.9% have been marked as state forestry parks.

“The classification of the remaining 132,583ha (82.9%) is not known or not specified.

“It should be noted that the National Forestry Act 1984 allows for the classification of a ‘permanent reserve forest’ as a ‘timber production forest under sustained yield’.

“As such, up to 82.9% of Ulu Muda may be harvested as ‘production forests’. The inevitable consequence of “harvesting” Ulu Muda will be disastrous water crises in Perlis, Kedah and Penang,” he said.

Jaseni said that with low rainfall and dwindling water levels in dams in Kedah, it would be “illogical” for the state government to approve and endorse deforestation that would compromise Ulu Muda as the primary source of water for the northern region.

Kedah Menteri Besar Muhammad Sanusi Md Nor had said 40 timber companies holding 131 logging concessions had demanded RM1.5 billion in compensation after the previous government decided to halt logging in selected areas of the forest reserve on Aug 30, 2018.

Sanusi said the logging rights to these 40 companies had been given for forests covering 22,098ha. The state received RM107.5 million in premiums from the concessionaires, with another RM79.5 million unpaid.

He said the total area of gazetted forest reserves was 107,197ha.