

Say no to re-opening of logging in Ulu Muda, PBAPP tells Kedah

By Audrey Dermawan - May 29, 2020 @ 6:20pm



The new Kedah government is reportedly considering re-opening logging concessions or allowing logging companies to harvest "production forests" to avoid paying compensation. - NSTP/File pic

GEORGE TOWN: Say no to the re-opening of logging concessions in Kedah.

This was the terse message from the Penang Water Supply Corporation (PBAPP), directed at the federal government, Perlis and Penang governments, National Water Services Commission (SPAN), non-government organisations as well as the 4.2 million people, padi farmers and businesses in Perlis, Kedah and Penang.

The corporation's statement follows recent news reports that the new Kedah government was reportedly considering re-opening logging concessions or allowing logging companies to harvest "production forests" to avoid paying compensation.

PBAPP chief executive officer Datuk Jaseni Maidinsa said under present circumstances, this was an irresponsible and short-sighted proposal because it would likely lead to logging in Ulu Muda, which is the most important water catchment area for Perlis, Kedah and Penang.

He said all three states were heavily dependent on rainwater collected in Ulu Muda's 160,000ha of rainforests.

About 70 per cent of Perlis' raw water and 96 per cent of Kedah's raw water originate from Ulu Muda. In Penang, PBAPP abstracts more than 80 per cent of the raw water that Penang needs daily from Sungai Muda, and the water catchment area for Sungai Muda is Ulu Muda.

On Nov 4 last year, the Water, Land and Natural Resources Ministry stated in Parliament that only 10.2 per cent (16,299 ha) of Ulu Muda had been classified as "water catchment forests" while another 6.9 per cent (11,118 ha) had been classified as "state forestry parks" under the National Forestry Act 1984 (NFA 1984).

The classification of the remaining 132,583 ha (82.9 per cent) of Ulu Muda is not known or not specified. It should be noted that Section 10(1)(a) of the NFA 1984 allows for the classification of a "permanent reserve forest" as a "timber production forest under sustained yield".

"As such, up to 82.9 per cent 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.

"Without sufficient raw water from Ulu Muda, businesses in all three states will have to shut down and padi farmers will not be able to grow their crops in the 'Ricebowl of Malaysia'. Most importantly, the daily lives and livelihoods of 4.2 million people who need water supply daily will be adversely affected," he said today.

Moreover, Jaseni said there were three dams in Kedah, in the Muda Water System, that store raw water from Ulu Muda.

As at Tuesday, the capacities of the Muda Dam, Beris Dam and Pedu Dam were 14.8 per cent, 52.3 per cent and 37.7 per cent, respectively.

"The abnormally low dam capacities reflect the effect of climate change in Kedah. It is likely that abnormally low volumes of rainfall were recorded in Ulu Muda in the period of June last year to mid-April this year. (The capacities of the Kedah dams have increased recently due to cloud seeding operations, commissioned by Penang, over Sungai Muda and these dams).

"With rainfall shortages and unpredictability due to climate change, it will be illogical for the Kedah government to approve and endorse deforestation that will compromise Ulu Muda's role as the most important water catchment area in north Malaysia," he added.

For now, Jaseni said that Perlis, Kedah and Penang were considered to be "green states" in the fight against the Covid-19 pandemic.

He said that for eight weeks, most people had to stay at home and practise good personal hygiene to keep the pandemic at bay.

"One of the key critical services that have helped all three states to achieve the 'green state' status is water supply. Malaysia had been successful in implementing the Movement Control Order (MCO) because Malaysians had enough water to drink, bathe, clean, wash and cook at home.

"Under the Conditional Movement Control Order (CMCO), people and businesses are working hard to recover from the effects of Covid-19 on the economy. Everyone and all businesses are dependent on water supply. However, the fight against Covid-19 is not over yet, and no one knows how long it is going to take to win this fight. What we do know is that we must have enough water supply for all, as the fight goes on.

"The last thing we need right now is to risk the sustainability of continuous water supply in Perlis, Kedah and Penang. The Kedah government's proposal to re-open logging concessions or allow logging companies to harvest 'production forests' in Ulu Muda, must be stopped. The risks are too high and the consequences may be too severe," he said.

Yesterday, the Consumers' Association of Penang (CAP) urged Kedah Menteri Besar Muhammad Sanusi Md Nor to come clean and disclose the names of the timber concessionaires and the amounts they were claiming so that the public could form an informed opinion on the conflicting claims and act upon it.

This followed Sanusi's recent revelation that his government was facing a claim of more than RM1 billion by the timber concession holders, despite his predecessor Datuk Seri Mukhriz Mahathir having disputed it.

Mukhriz had stated that after several meetings between the Kedah government and timber concession holders, the issue of compensation had been agreed upon and what was needed was only its implementation.

Sanusi, on Wednesday, had said that his predecessor knew full well about the RM1 billion in compensation payable to some 40 timber concession holders after rights to log in permanent forest reserves were withdrawn. He had said the situation came about after the previous administration decided to halt logging in select areas of the Ulu Muda Permanent Forest Reserve on Aug 30, 2018.