

Penang mulls desalination plants to meet growing water demand

Perak expresses hesitation over Sg Perak plan, says it has its own supply issues

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Datuk Jaseni Maidinsa, chief executive officer of Penang Water Supply Corporation, says Penang, as an island surrounded by sea, may utilise desalination technology (like Singapore) to theoretically tap an unlimited amount of raw water for the future. – Bernama pic, March 7, 2022

GEORGE TOWN – Penang may begin commissioning desalination plants in the state from 2030 onwards to meet growing water demand should a current 11-year-old proposal for supply of raw water from a river in Perak not take off by then.

Datuk Jaseni Maidinsa, chief executive officer of Penang Water Supply Corporation (PBAPP), said the commissioning of the plants may be implemented in phases.

He said Penang's water consumption was 860 million litres per day (MLD) in 2021.

Projections from an independent water study completed last year indicate that the water demand may be driven by socioeconomic factors to increase by 78.1% (672 MLD) and would reach 1,532 MLD by 2030.

"As such, it will help to ensure that Penang has a healthy 'reserve margin' and avoid a water crisis until 2030," he said.

The statement comes on the heels of a meeting on March 3 between Penang Chief Minister Chow Kon Yeow and Perak Menteri Besar Datuk Seri Saarani Mohamad on the Sg Perak Raw Water Transfer Scheme (SPRWTS).

It involves a proposed diversion of water from Sg Perak to Sg Kerian with the implementation to be made through the private financing initiative method.

The Perak side had expressed apprehension about supplying water to Penang from Sg Perak.

Saarani had reportedly cited problems faced by his state, with lack of raw water supply for use in various sectors such as industrial, commercial, agricultural and residential, especially in the northern part of Perak.

Jaseni said that in 2019, PBAPP had proposed the Penang Water Supply Initiative 2050 (PWSI 2050) to the state government as a roadmap to ensure water supply security for Penang until 2050.

The PWSI 2050 has been revised several times to address scenarios in which the SPRWTS is further delayed and cannot be implemented by 2030.

"In the face of such a scenario, PBAPP has proposed the commissioning of desalination plants to meet Penang's projected raw water demand and looking ahead, the commissioning of desalination plants in Penang may be implemented in phases, beginning from 2030.

Jaseni said that Penang, as an island surrounded by sea, may utilise desalination technology (like Singapore) to theoretically tap an unlimited amount of raw water for the future.

It should be kept in mind that water supply is an essential public service that affects the daily lives of 1.776 million people in Penang, as well as the operations of thousands of businesses, he stressed.

Contingency plans being mulled

The state also plans to complete two upgrading projects while embarking on plans to tap local sources to ensure sufficient supply for the future.

PBAPP is planning to upgrade the Sg Dua Water Treatment Plant, and build two new treatment plants near the Mengkuang Dam and Sg Muda.

“We are planning to start tapping Sg Perai as an additional raw water resource for Penang.

The projects are key components of PBAPP’s Raw Water Contingency Plan 2030 (RWCP2030).

Speaking about the meeting between Chow and Saarani, Jaseni said that Chow tabled a conditional offer for Penang to buy raw water from Perak. Penang’s objective was to secure a deal for the SPRWTS, after which an official agreement could be signed later this year.

He added that the agreement would provide the necessary impetus for the federal government to commence works on the SPRWTS in 2023, after detailed engineering studies are conducted, and commission the scheme for raw water delivery by 2030.

However, the Perak delegation’s agenda was different, he said. Perak took the opportunity to point out that it may not have excess raw water to sell to Penang.

“The meeting ended with both parties agreeing to wait for the outcome of the final report of the Environment and Water Ministry’s engineering study which is expected to be completed in April,” he said, adding that PBAPP has contingency plans following the latest scenario.

Penang is implementing RWCP2030 to ensure water supply security until 2030.

“In view of the latest SPRWTS scenario, PBAPP is recommending desalination of the sea water in Penang to meet future raw water supply demands beyond 2030,” he said.