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Media Release

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SUNGAI MUDA: AVOID RAW WATER POLLUTION ISSUES THAT HAVE PLAGUED KL AND SELANGOR

- **On 31.8.2021, 463 areas in Selangor experienced an unscheduled water supply interruption due to raw water pollution at Sungai Semenyih.**
- **In 2020, there were 6 reports of raw water pollution that affected millions of water consumers in Selangor and Kuala Lumpur.**
- **EIA report of Kulim International Airport (KXP) and “Aerotropolis” in Kedah, outlines a huge development project that will discharge wastewater into Sungai Muda, the indispensable raw water resource for Penang and South Kedah.**

PENANG, Monday, 6.9.2021: While seeking to resolve issues of raw water pollution that have affected millions of water consumers in Selangor and Kuala Lumpur, the Federal Government must also prevent such issues from occurring in Penang and Kedah.

According to a news report published by Sinar Harian (dated 11.11.2020), there were 6 cases of raw water pollution in Selangor in 2020. These cases occurred in March, April, September, October and November 2020.

On 31.8.2021, the mass media published yet another raw water pollution story following an Air Selangor web posting*. The online post stated that 463 areas in Selangor would experience unscheduled raw water interruptions arising from raw water pollution involving Sungai Semenyih, as detected at the Jenderam Hilir Intake.

These incidents reflect the real-world risks and threats of raw water pollution that will occur (and possibly recur) due to developments and “easy access” to key riverbank areas.

Level up on protection and punishment

To date, most of the incidences of raw water pollution in Malaysia have been largely attributed to human error, negligence, ignorance and/or ill intent.

To minimise the risks of recurrences, all the riverbanks of key raw water resources in Malaysia must be clearly designated, protected and policed as “limited access areas”. No unauthorised personnel or activities should be allowed in (or near) such areas. Such a ruling must be enforced consistently, without fear or favour.

As an additional deterrent, the punishments for raw water resource pollution should be reviewed to be more severe, to reflect the implications of “crimes” that endanger the good health and well-being of millions of people that depend on good water supply daily.

Kulim (KXP) airport project: prevention better than cure

To avoid raw water pollution in Penang and South Kedah, the Federal Government must not approve new land development projects adjacent to Sungai Muda. While such projects may promise and promote economic advancement, none of them should jeopardise raw water quality.

A case in point is the proposed Kulim International Airport (KXP) and “Aerotropolis” mega-project along the riverbanks of Sungai Muda in Sidam Kiri, Kuala Muda, Kedah.

According to the environmental impact assessment (EIA) report, as published for public consultation by the Ministry of Environment and Water (KASA), the KXP and its aerotropolis project will see the development of:

- An aerodrome;
- Power generation and transmission facilities;
- A new 20-hectare (or larger) industrial estate;
- A new 100-hectare (or larger) township with 2,000 housing units; and
- A sewage treatment plant that will discharge wastewater into Sungai Jurong, and the wastewater will subsequently flow into Sungai Muda.

The primary issue of concern for Perbadanan Bekalan Air Pulau Pinang Sdn Bhd (PBAPP) is that this project will be located on 3,982.51 hectares of land, adjacent to the banks of Sungai Muda.

The nearest point of the proposed project site is just 6km upstream of Penang's Lahar Tiang Raw Water Intake in Seberang Prai. More than 80% of the raw water that PBAPP abstracts daily to provide good water supply services in Penang, comes from the Lahar Tiang intake.

As such, this project presents a clear threat to the sustainability of continuous good water supply services in Penang and South Kedah because:

1. The EIA report states that the construction phase may cause siltation, sedimentation, raw water contamination, river water toxification, degradation of water quality and eutrophication (water pollution resulting from excessive concentration of phosphorous, nitrogen and other plant nutrients).
2. Subsequently, the operational phase poses the same risks and threats on a long-term basis, according to the EIA report.
3. Risks and threats aside, the project requires a sewage treatment plant which will discharge industrial and domestic wastewater that will flow into Sungai Muda. The projected volume of wastewater to be discharged daily is significant because the EIA report states that this sewage plant would be initially designed with 50,000 population equivalent (PE) capacity and expanded to 500,000 PE in 30 years.

The quality of the raw water that PBAPP abstracts from Sungai Muda, downstream of the proposed project site, will be inevitably affected by daily discharges of wastewater.

Raw water from Sungai Muda is used to produce treated water for 1.78 million people in Penang. Penangites use PBAPP treated water for drinking, cooking, bathing, washing and cleaning daily.

With these 3 key reasons in mind, PBAPP would like to urge the Department of Environment (DoE), KASA and the Federal Government to kindly get the Kedah State Government to "relocate" the proposed KXP and its aerotropolis to a safer location, away from Sungai Muda.

It is irrational and illogical for the people of Penang to accept the water supply risks and threats posed by this project. More importantly, no one wants wastewater to be willfully pumped into their primary raw water resource.

Penang and PBAPP sympathise and emphasise with water consumers in Kuala Lumpur and Selangor over their water supply woes. We do not wish to face the same issues in the future ...due to the KXP, its aerotropolis or any other development project that jeopardises good water supply services.

Water resource pollution: public health implications

In Malaysia, millions of people rely on water supply services to support their daily lives and socioeconomic activities. Almost all of the treated water supplied by all Malaysian water operators (including PBAPP) originate from existing river basins, encompassing rainforests, streams and rivers.

As such, the sustainability of good water supply services is highly dependent on proper conservation and protection of healthy water basins and rainforest water catchment areas, such as Ulu Muda in Kedah. In fact, to ensure this, Penang and PBAPP have recommended to establish the Ulu Muda Basin Authority (UMBA).

Malaysia has been “fortunate” that none of its recent reported cases of river pollution have escalated to become public health issues. However, clear and definitive actions must be taken to actively conserve, protect and police our precious raw water resources, primarily to prevent potential public health catastrophes in the future.

Thank You.

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*<https://www.airselangor.com/sungai-semenyih-water-treatment-plant-shutdown-following-an-odour-pollution-incident-at-the-jenderam-hilir-intake/>