

Kedah revokes and halts issuing new permits for felling trees

NATION

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GEORGE TOWN: If trees could speak, those in the Ulu Muda Forest Reserve may thank the Kedah government.

With immediate effect, the state is revoking logging permits in the massive jungle and suspending the issuance of new ones, says Land, Water and Natural Resources Minister Dr Xavier Jayakumar.

With Kedah sacrificing its revenue from forest premiums for the sake of water security in northern Malaysia, the minister said the Federal Government is now studying how to compensate Kedah for preserving Ulu Muda Forest Reserve.

Dr Xavier said he met Kedah Menteri Besar Datuk Seri Mukhriz Mahathir on Monday during his working visit to the state and was given the good news.

“We are thankful to Mukhriz. This is great news for Perlis, Kedah and Penang because it will protect the future of the region.

“The Ulu Muda catchment area is vital to the water security of the three states, not just for drinking water, but also for agricultural use,” Dr Xavier said when he visited the Sungai Pinang flood mitigation info centre in Lorong Kulit here yesterday.

Twice the size of Singapore, Ulu Muda forest is critical to northern Malaysia both as a catchment area and to hold on to heavy rainfall and prevent flooding in the coastal plains of the three states.

Kedah, however, needs the RM40mil in revenue from the forest premiums it derives from the issuance of logging permits.

Penang, which gets 80% of its water supply from Sungai Muda flowing out of this jungle, has repeatedly called for the Federal Government to compensate Kedah for protecting the jungle.

Dr Xavier also expressed his views on Penang’s desire to buy water from Perak.



Save our forests: A logging trail (left) visible through cut forest near Kampung Kota Aur near Ulu Muda Dam in Sik, Kedah and 'The Star's' article on April 13 of the same forest reserve

"The Federal Government will assist financially, but whether it is raw or treated water, I will let both states discuss and come to a win-win situation.

"Penang wants to buy raw water, but Perak wants to sell treated water. However, both states agree this project must take place so we will let both sides negotiate," he said.

Asked about Perak's insistence that it should sell "higher value" treated water to Penang and Selangor because the state has to maintain its catchment areas, Dr Xavier said it was "too premature for any state to insist on anything and they should meet and discuss".

"Perak has enough water. Studies show the state even has a surplus. "This is just an inter-state water deal for Perak to supply water to Penang. It's not free. Penang will have to pay and Perak will get revenue," Dr Xavier said.

Inter-state water deals also exist from Pahang to Selangor and Johor to Melaka, and the prevailing rate is three sen per 1,000 litres.

Dr Xavier also announced that the long-awaited next phase of the Sungai Pinang flood mitigation project would begin in the middle of next year, at the latest. It should be finished by 2023.

Costing RM150mil, it involves widening the river between Jalan Patani and Jalan Ayer Itam, and also the construction of levees, flood walls, water gates, rubbish traps, flow controls and bridges.

The Sungai Pinang flood mitigation project is considered one of the longest delayed in the country and critical to solving flood woes in George Town.

It was conceived under the Seventh Malaysia Plan in 1996 with a budget of RM650mil.

State Local Government Committee chairman Jagdeep Singh Deo, who accompanied Dr Xavier, hailed the commitment of the Federal Government to restart the project, "which has long been sorely neglected by the previous government after the first phase was completed 1999".

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