

'No illegal clearing at Bukit Merah Lake'

CLARIFICATION: Minister says activity carried out on federal land

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THE alleged clearing of an area in a permanent forest reserve area in Perak was actually carried out on federal land, said Natural Resources and Environment Minister Datuk Seri Dr Wan Junaidi Tuanku Jaafar yesterday.

In a statement, Wan Junaidi said the allegation was made based on old reviews and that the area concerned would be gazetted soon.

"I was told that the entire Pondok Tanjung Forest Reserve near federal land will be gazetted as a water catchment area.

"A project paper was prepared and presented to the Perak government on May 23."

The protection of water catchment areas, he said, was critical as

they were water sources.

"The state government's action is sensible and timely. It is in line with the Federal Government's efforts to safeguard water sources.

"I have given orders to the Forestry Department to take follow-up actions," he said, adding that he hoped the issue would be given serious attention by the state government.

Earlier this month, it was reported that illegal clearing in the Bukit Merah Lake Forest Reserve in Kerian could lead to a decline in the lake's water level.

Environmental groups had urged the authorities to take legal action against anyone found to have encroached and illegally cleared the forest.

They claimed that the illegal activities could affect the district's granary area and hundreds of thousands of hectares of padi in nearby Seberang Perai, Penang.

The state government reiterated there was no illegal clearing near the Bukit Merah Lake.

Perak Forestry director Datuk Roslan Ariffin said the reserve, which bordered the lake, was about 9,000ha.

"The rest of the land is state land or privately owned."

Speaking to the *New Straits Times* at the opening of the Alor Pongsu exit at the North-South Expressway here on Tuesday, Roslan said the department had checked and confirmed that the land was privately owned.

"Eighty-five per cent of the land at the lake is privately owned," he said, when asked to comment on claims by Sahabat Alam Malaysia (SAM) that of the 3,000ha of the Bukit Merah reservoir reserve, 2,000ha had been encroached.

Saying that the information given by SAM was old, Roslan said the reserve was more than a century old.

He said the department had arrested three men for encroaching into the forest reserve at Bukit Merah.