

Transparency called for in move to degazette Kuala Langat forest reserve

ON April 11, State Tourism, Environment, Green Technology and Orang Asli Affairs Committee chairman Hee Loy Sian said a proposal to degazette the Kuala Langat North Forest Reserve is still under discussion and the Selangor government is examining the views of experts. He added that if the degazetting is implemented, the state government would have to find a replacement (forest) that is of better quality than the existing one.

The public would assume that in the meantime the Selangor government was still examining the views and deliberating on the issue until it was revealed that the decision for the degazetting of the Kuala Langat North Forest Reserve was made under section 12 of the National Forestry Act 1984, in the state executive committee meeting on May 5, less than a month after the chairman said the matter was still under discussion.

The revelation, by the chairman himself was made at the Selangor legislative assembly on 30 August 2021, almost 3 months after the decision was made. Aside from agreeing to degazette, the Selangor government also approved an area of 581ha as permanent forest reserve replacement involving PT4182 in the Sungai Panjang sub-district, in Sabak Bernam (308ha); Ampang Pechah, Buloh Telor sub-district, Hulu Selangor district (209ha) and Bukit Broga, Semenyih sub-district, Hulu Langat district (64ha).

Selangor Forestry Department director Ahmad Fadzil Abdul Majid told Bernama on April 24 that due to the complexity of the process, degazetting a forest reserve usually takes years to do.

The long period is mainly attributed to the difficulties in finding a replacement forest that is of equivalent or higher value to replace the one earmarked for degazetting. Thus, since 2010, the Selangor government has only managed to degazette three forest reserves, which was in Bukit Lagong totalling 3.2ha, Ulu Gombak (20ha) and Rantau Panjang (1.6ha)

And yet in this case, the chairman is expecting the public to believe that from April 11 to May, 5, fewer than 20 working days, the Selangor government performed with such efficiency that it not only concluded studying the views of the relevant experts, it also found the replacement forests of 581ha and prepare the proposal for tabling to the state exco, a process which the Selangor Forestry Department director has confirmed normally takes years to do.

Shrouded in secrecy

The chairman also said there were no objections from the Departments of Environment, Forestry, Drainage and Irrigation, Wildlife and National Parks and Orang Asli Development as

well as the Dean of Faculty of Forestry and Environment of Universiti Putra Malaysia, among others, during the meetings.

Yet an official request from environmental group Pertubuhan Pelindung Khazanah Alam for a copy of the Forestry Department's report on the KLNFR, submitted through the Freedom of Information (State of Selangor) Enactment 2010, was rejected by the Forestry Department on March 19 citing secrecy and the release of the information could jeopardise the development plans of the state.

Will the exco seek the state assembly's approval?

The chairman also said a motion to cancel the plan to degazette the forest, unanimously supported in the state assembly in November 2020, is non-binding. Members of the exco are drawn from the state assembly, including the state secretary, the state legal adviser and the state financial officer. If it is non-binding, why did the chairman and the rest of the exco, who are all part of the legislative assembly, support the motion to cancel the plans when it was proposed and tabled yet object to it six months later?

Since the chairman has said that the decision of the legislative assembly is non-binding, who approved the plan contrary to the unanimous decision of the state assembly? Does the exco expect the legislative assembly to approve and gazette the replacement forests to replace the degazetted area?

Unexplained replacement of developers

In March 2020, the menteri besar said witian Jutaria Sdn Bhd and Menteri Besar Inc have submitted proposals to develop the forest and the Selangor government is expected to receive nearly RM324 million comprising land premiums, land tax, etc from these two companies.

Yet on August 30, in the state assembly, the chairman revealed that a company by the name of Gabungan Indah Sdn Bhd, which was only incorporated on November 2 will be redeveloping the degazetted area into a mixed-commercial development.

Why was there a change of developers? Did the first two companies withdraw their proposals? How was Gabungan Indah selected? Is it proposing the same concept as the two companies?

How much will Gabungan Indah Sdn Bhd be paying the Selangor government? Using the criteria set by the state government in seeking replacement forests to replace the degazetted area, the total amount should not be less than RM324 million that the menteri besar said Titian Jutaria Sdn Bhd and Menteri Besar Inc would be paying the state.

40% of land 'degraded' by encroachment and fires

Both the menteri besar and the chairman said forest fires had “degraded” 40% of the KLNFR, and the forest now poses a fire hazard.

Selangor Forestry Department director Fadzil said his use of the term “degraded” referred to a reduction in diversity of flora and fauna in the forest.

A study in 2010 entitled “Effect of Forest Fire on Stand Structure in the RMFR, Selangor”, however, revealed that species diversity in the RMFR is lower than that in the KLNFR, the area being degazetted.

Also, since 2014, the Selangor government has spent an estimated RM2.2 million to build fire prevention infrastructure and planted more than 10,000 trees, recovering 300ha of the forest, with only one significant fire occurring in the KLNFR since then.

If degradation, due to forest fires or a reduction in diversity of the species of flora and fauna in the forests, is used as the main basis for the degazetting, the facts and statistics do not appear to support it.

The Raja Musa and the Kuala Langat South Forest Reserves should be degazetted instead of KLNFR as forest fires since 2012 in both these reserves have degraded a land size bigger than that in the KLNFR as shown in the above table.

The chairman has said that the degazetting of the forest is a long-term plan for the next generation who may be in search of property in the next 10 to 15 years

According to the Statistics Department, the population of Selangor, presently at 6.7 million, is projected to grow to 7.6 million by 2030 and 8 million by 2035.

In 2020, the housing and local government minister said Kuala Langat is set to become one of the most sought-after places in Selangor in the future with the Kuala Langat Industrial Park slated to be a regional hub for electrical and electronics, one of the five sectors identified under the Selangor Industrial Master Plan in the next five years.

A report by the Malaysian Investment Development Authority showed that the Kuala Langat district registered the highest investment within Selangor in 2020 at RM5.7 billion that could potentially create employment for 2,180 workers by 2022.

Kuala Langat appears to be the next growth township.

Why wasn't the projected growth in the Kuala Langat area used to justify the de-gazetting of the forest reserve instead of the wishy-washy answer of degradation of the KLNFR? – September 3, 2021.

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