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Committee may make haze action plan mandatory

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KUALA LUMPUR, Thurs. - The National Haze Committee today decided to examine the possibility of making the implementation of the haze action plan mandatory.

As a result, Government agencies and ministries represented on the committee have been asked to see if laws under their jurisdiction can be applied when implementing the plan.

The committee also decided to widen its powers by expanding the committee to include other Government agencies and ministries.

They include the Ministries of Public Enterprises and Primary Industries and local authorities. The committee also wants Sukom and oil companies to be represented.

Members currently include officials from the Ministries of Education, Health, Transport, Information and International Trade and Industry; the Departments of Road Transport, Environment and Civil Aviation; Institute of Medical Research, the Prime Minister's Department, Kuala Lumpur City Hall and Universiti Putra Malaysia.

Speaking after chairing a two-hour meeting today, Science, Technology and Environment Minister Datuk Law Hieng Ding said the decisions were made following questions about the action plan's effectiveness.

The plan, approved by the Cabinet last month, is currently implemented on a voluntary basis.

"No decision has been made on making it mandatory. We are going a step further by examining this possibility in case we need to make it mandatory.

"We want to know which laws can be applied by the respective agencies," Law said.

For instance, the action plan stipulates that car park charges should be increased when an area records unhealthy air quality readings for more than 72 hours and is placed on early alert stage one.

The problem is that air quality readings fluctuate daily. Air quality can deteriorate one day and improve the next.

Therefore, Law said the committee must see if car park charges could be increased throughout haze period, instead of depending solely on daily air pollutant index readings.

He said members would submit their findings when the committee meets again next month.

On the expansion of the committee, Law said this was a directive from Prime Minister, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

The Public Enterprises Ministry is to be included because public transport comes its jurisdiction. Public transport operators are to reduce fares under early alert stage one of the plan.

Primary Industries Ministry's representation is needed because it governs plantations. The ministry can help check open burning on plantations, for instance.

Oil companies' co-operation is important in supplying low sulphur content fuel oil while Sukom has to be represented because the Government wants to introduce measures to prevent the haze during next year's Commonwealth Games.

Law said he has also asked the national committee on disaster management and relief to begin activating the action plan even before the air quality reaches hazardous levels.

"They do not need to activate it on a full-scale basis. All they need to do is focus on education and monitoring at State and district level.

Law said it also proposed to include cloud-seeding as one of the measures under the action plan. This will be discussed further.

He had asked City Hall to step up enforcement activities and to see if the recent introduction of bus lanes was effective in encouraging more people to use buses.

To encourage car-pooling, Law has asked the RTD to compile a report on the problems faced by people using public transport.

The Health Ministry was directed to compile a report on health problems caused by the haze and the areas affected. The statistics should include cases from private clinics.

At the same time, the DOE will work with the IMR to study air content during the haze period.

The DCA will compile a report on the list of flights cancelled or delayed due to the haze.

Law hoped to invite an official from the Transport Ministry and Meteorological Services Department to attend next week's Asean Environment Ministers Meeting in Indonesia.

This is to enable the officers to follow up on cloud-seeding efforts.

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