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Govt to get design plan in mid-Aug

Kang Siew Li

THE design plan for the Malaysia Wetland Sanctuary in Kuala Langat, Selangor will be submitted to Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad in mid-August, Malaysian Wetlands Foundation chairman Tan Sri Abdul Halim Ali said.

Fifty-two environmental experts from the US, Europe, Australia and Malaysia are currently in Kuala Lumpur to draft the design plan of the project for the Malaysian Wetlands Foundation, which is responsible for undertaking and managing the project.

Abdul Halim, who is also the Chief Secretary to the Government, said work will start within the next nine weeks.

"We are excited about this project and we are happy the Government has given us its full support.

"We are now ready to begin work to establish the wetland sanctuary," he told reporters in Kuala Lumpur yesterday after delivering a keynote address at a workshop to signify the beginning of the design phase of the project.

The Malaysia Wetland Sanctuary project is one of Malaysia's largest integrated wetlands conservation and development projects, given its vicinity to the Multimedia Super Corridor.

Abdul Halim said the project will incorporate the use of advanced technologies particularly in information technology and environment technology.

The establishment of the sanctuary project stemmed from the 1995 Kuala Lumpur Declaration on Wetlands and Development, of which a number of important initiatives were also agreed upon, which emphasised the protection of wetland sites, mangroves and the Wetland Wonders.

The primary objectives of the project and its attributes are for:

- * rehabilitation and conservation of peat swamp forest and associated wetlands;
- * integrating environmental management and sustainable development;
- * enhancing South-South cooperation and capacity building in natural resource management particularly in wetlands;
- * establishing and undertaking training and educational initiatives in conservation particularly in wetlands;
- * increasing the awareness on the importance of wetlands; and
- * recreation and tourism.

Abdul Halim said the design plan will focus on rehabilitating, conserving and sustainably maintaining the diverse biological resources of 5,000ha in Kuala Langat.

"It will also be a good project to begin utilising ISO 14000 as a guiding principle and standard to adhere to," the foundation chairman added.

One of the causes of concern is sand mining activities which have degraded the project site.

"Over the past few years, there have been several sand mining activities reported in that area.

"However, the Selangor Government has given its pledge to stop them as soon as possible," he said.

Abdul Halim said he has been informed by the State Government that some of the existing contracts for conducting sand mining activities are about to expire or have already expired and that no new licences will be issued.

"Of course, it is a question of enforcement. I think we have to work closely with the Selangor authorities to ensure that after they have withdrawn the licences from the companies, no illegal activities will take place," Abdul Halim said.

Abdul Halim said response from the private sector has been encouraging "and we expect more as soon as the wetland sanctuary project gets off the ground."

"I think this project is something which everybody supports, so we don't see any difficulty in getting the financial support from the private sector," he said.

To date, Abdul Halim said, several financial institutions have already pledged and given their contribution and "we are confident that many other institutions would come forward and support this project".

They include the United Nations which has allocated a total of US\$17 million (US\$1 = RM2.51) under the Global Environment Facility, Bank Bumiputra Malaysia Bhd RM2 million, Renong Bhd RM1 million and Hongkong Bank Malaysia Bhd RM500,000.

Asked how much the wetland sanctuary project would need, Abdul Halim said: "The exact figure cannot be ascertained at this time but from the pledged contributions so far, we think that we can begin to work on the project."

Malaysian Wetlands Foundation chief executive officer Muralee Menon said the target date for the opening of the wetland sanctuary is September next year.

"But beyond that, we will phase the project according to the availability of resources," he said.

Facilities to be built first will be determined during the next nine weeks.

Menon also said the foundation is currently waiting for the Selangor Government to gazette the 500ha "which we expect to happen very soon".

On June 6 last year, Dr Mahathir had endorsed the concept of developing a wetland sanctuary of international standard known as the Malaysia Wetland Sanctuary project.

The project area encompasses a myriad of eco-systems, namely degraded tin mine land, logged peat swamp forest, large open lakes and the Kuala Langat peat swamp forest.

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