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State to oversee development in Lojing Highlands

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KOTA BARU, Wed. - The State Government, which had previously denied reports of environmental degradation in the Lojing Highlands, said today that it would strictly supervise development there to prevent extensive destruction.

Deputy Menteri Besar Abdul Halim Abdul Rahman said a special committee had been formed to oversee development in the State's highlands.

Speaking after the weekly State Executive Council meeting at Kota Darulnaim, Abdul Halim said the State Government had been briefed on the situation in the Lojing Highlands by the director-general of the Department of Environment, Tan Meng Leng.

The indiscriminate clearing of land in Lojing was first highlighted in August 1994 when Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad expressed concern that State Governments were allowing development on hillslopes despite repeated reminders not to.

A New Straits Times team which visited the Lojing Highlands in September, found evidence of logging and land clearing.

Eroding hillslopes and silted rivers are a common sight.

"The committee is currently monitoring development in Lojing and will send reports to the State Government on the situation there," he added.

Abdul Halim said the briefing was held in response to reports of severe environmental degradation in the Highlands.

During the briefing, Abdul Halim said the State Government was advised to supervise development projects.

"It is not that we (State Government) are complacent about the matter. We have observed guidelines given by the DOE on development of highlands all this while and informed investors to abide by them," he added.

According to Abdul Halim, the State Government received more than 50 applications from investors to carry out development projects in highland areas.

However, he said only four companies had started their respective projects, adding that all were agricultural projects.

He also said the State Government, through its relevant agencies including the Land and Mines Department and the District Offices, would take steps to ensure that those who had been given approval to develop highland areas embarked on their respective projects without adversely affecting the environment.

"The State Government is responsible for supervising projects not exceeding 200ha," he said, adding that approval of Environmental Impact Assessment reports from the DOE would be required for projects over more than 200ha of land.

Asked on the extent of the environmental damage at Lojing, Abdul Halim said the situation had improved.

"We have also advised logging companies to be selective in the felling of trees to minimise environmental degradation as well as to prevent serious erosion of hillslopes," he added.

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