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Increased in allocation seen as a positive measure

THE increased allocation for the environment is seen as a positive sign considering the country is facing an economic downturn.

However, environmentalists said the money should be efficiently utilised to implement effective preventive measures and enforcement activities to tackle the pollution problem.

In announcing the 1999 Budget yesterday, First Finance Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said an allocation of RM265 million would be made for the environment.

This year's allocation was slashed to RM142 million. However, the amount has been brought back to last year's level of RM265.4 million.

Former Department of Environment director-general Tan Meng Leng said the move to increase allocation for the environment was positive considering the Government's main concern has been the country's stability.

However, he said detailed information such as the exact amount to be allocated for the various areas mentioned was important implementation-wise.

"We are now moving into a new section (of environmental protection) where management of natural resources such as water and forests, is given emphasis," he said.

In his speech, Dr Mahathir said the allocation is to monitor pollution, conserve natural resources and improve the environment.

Efforts will be taken towards an integrated planning approach, sustainable use and development of natural resources, conservation of water catchment areas and preservation of forest reserves.

Dr Mahathir said cooperation with neighbouring countries would be enhanced to monitor and overcome environmental problems such as forest fires.

Tan said it was time for implementation of programmes to tackle pollution instead of carrying out more studies. This is because prevention will help save cost of having to clean up later.

Environmental Protection Society of Malaysia advisor Gurmit Singh said what was most important was the allocation and efficient use of the money.

"It is not clear as to how the money is going to be used especially to protect water catchments," he said.

Gurmit said ensuring the people get clean and uninterrupted water supply was also crucial. As such, he said sufficient money should be allocated to change the country's water supply and piping system.

"As for forest fires, preventive measures should be taken instead of fighting the fires," he said.

World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) Malaysia's policy analyst Andrew Ng said the Government should channel much of the resources into enforcement to prevent costly impacts of environmental problems.

Such a pre-emptive action will also ensure a reduction of the subsequent need for pollution controls and monitoring resources.

WWF hopes that more focus is given to enforcement and proper management rather than monitoring.

"The environment has to be treated in much the same way as the economy. The enforcement agencies must be given more authority to enforce.

"The problems of ensuring effective enforcement can take a cue from the tough stance by Bank Negara to curb speculation and jump start the economy," said Ng.

On the protection of water catchments, Ng said there was a need to recognise that most water catchments in Peninsular Malaysia were also in areas of forest reserves.

When these resources are managed properly, the water shortage problem faced will be curbed. As such, there should be holistic and integrated planning.

River management is just as essential when dealing with water catchments as the intake of water is at focal points along the river systems.

"River reserves must be properly maintained and enforcement strictly enforced. Funds should be allocated to these activities," said Ng.

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