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Telaga Air prawn farms closed, fixtures destroyed

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KUCHING, Fri. - At a time when every bit of food produced will help the country to reduce costly imports, the State Land and Survey Department has ordered the closure of prawn farms in Telaga Air and destroyed the structures on site.

The closure order affects 329 illegal ponds in the area.

Yesterday, a tiger prawn farm belonging to former Yang di-Pertua Negeri Tun Abang Muhammad Salahuddin was among three closed down, as the Department's officers began acting against people occupying State land.

Tun Salahuddin watched helplessly as the enforcement officers led by the Kuching Division's Superintendent of Lands and Survey, Marzuki Ibrahim, demolished the illegal structures and released the water from the ponds at about 5pm.

Saying that it would be a big loss to the State, he said that 300-odd ponds in Telaga Air were projected to bring in an annual revenue of RM100 million once they were all in production.

He added that some of the farms were still at the infant stage while a few others had already been stocked.

Over 20 uniformed and plainclothes policemen were present to ensure the officers were not hampered in carrying out their duties.

The tiger prawn farmers were issued with two notices on Feb 11 and 17 by the department to move out within one week from the date of the notices, failing which enforcement officers would demolish any structures and destroy the ponds.

Marzuki, when pressed for comments by reporters at the scene, said they had been repeatedly reminded to move out but they failed to comply.

"We had to act since they failed to adhere to our final warning issued through an eviction notice on Feb 17," he said, adding that the decision to demolish the structures and the ponds was in accordance with the State Land Code Ordinance. Only 94 ponds in the area are legal and run by companies.

A dejected Tun Salahuddin, Yang diPertua Negeri from 1977 to 1981, said he had invested about RM1 million to set up his farm.

He added that his farmhouse alone cost him RM80,000.

"I don't understand why the enforcement officers have to act in a high-handed manner since we have been assured by the Minister of Agriculture and Food Industries Datuk Adenan Satem that we could stay until May 16," he said.

"But when I asked the officer heading the demolition exercise he told me that he was acting on the instructions of the government," he added.

He said that they would be seeking a meeting with Adenan to discuss the issue.

Another farmer, who identified himself as Kueh, said that his farmhouse-cum-office, which was completely demolished, cost him RM60,000.

Yet another farmer said he had lost RM290,000 with the demolition of his three farms.

He added that he had stocked RM150,000 worth of small prawns in one of the farms which the enforcement officers had destroyed.

A heavy machinery dealer, who refused to identify himself, said that his company would lose between RM6.5 million and RM8 million with the cancellation of orders for machinery by the farmers.

Permanent secretary to the Ministry of Resource Planning and Management

Zaidi Zaini, said the land used by the tiger prawn farmers was adjacent to the land given by the State Government to the Federal Government for the proposed Federal Administrative Centre in Sarawak.

Chief Minister Tan Sri Abdul Taib Mahmud announced the presentation of the 800ha land, about 30km from Kuching, to Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad who visited Sarawak on Aug 27 last year.

Zaidi, however, could not comment on whether tiger prawn farming activities would damage the eco-system not only in Telaga Air but also the surrounding areas.

He added that assistant Minister in the Chief Minister's Office Awang Tengah Ali Hassan would call a Press conference next week on why the State Government did not want tiger prawn farming in the vicinity of the land given to the Federal Government.

Late this afternoon, a group of tiger prawn farmers met Adenan and appealed to him to stop the closure order.

A spokesman for the group said Adenan made no commitment when they met him at his office.

"He also did not respond when we asked him about the three-month grace period he announced in Bintulu last Monday," he said.

(Adenan, at a Press conference, had stated that the farmers had been allowed to occupy the land until May 16.)

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