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Pollution of rivers not reduced despite measures taken, says DOE

Esther Tan

KUALA LUMPUR, Wed. - There was no improvement last year in the state of 15 rivers identified as polluted in 1997 despite efforts by various government agencies to improve water quality.

The situation worsened where numbers are concerned with another river - the Sungai Senggit in Johor - joining the list.

Science, Technology and Environment Minister Datuk Law Hieng Ding told the Cabinet today that the main sources of pollution were sewage, silt and organic pollutants from the agriculture and manufacturing sectors.

The rivers were the Sungai Air Baloi, Sungai Danga, Sungai Tukang Batu and Sungai Kempas (in Johor), Sungai Buloh, Sungai Kelang and Sungai Sepang (Selangor), Sungai Jejawi, Sungai Pinang and Sungai Juru (Penang), Sungai Miri/Lutong (Sarawak), Sungai Balok (Pahang), Sungai Merbok (Kedah), Sungai Landas (Terengganu) and Sungai Jimah (Negri Sembilan).

However, Sungai Jimah was cleaned by the Drainage and Irrigation Department (DID) recently following the viral encephalitis epidemic.

On Oct 6, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad told the Cabinet that he had spotted a "blackish" river during his flight from Zimbabwe to the Sultan Abdul Aziz Shah Airport in Subang.

Subsequently, Law directed the DOE to investigate. Several rivers around the KLIA and the Sultan Abdul Aziz Shah Airport were found to be polluted. The Sungai Sepang is believed to be among them.

Law said 43 per cent of these rivers were polluted with ammoniacal nitrogen largely due to domestic waste and livestock farming with 34 per cent polluted by solids from earthworks and land-clearing.

He said 21 per cent were polluted by waste from agricultural and manufacturing activities.

"The condition of the rivers is not yet critical. However, if there is no co-operation and co-ordinated effort from all departments and agencies, the situation will worsen.

"If we all work together, we can control and improve the situation," he told reporters after the Cabinet meeting.

The agencies which have a role in river protection and rehabilitation are the local authorities, the DID, the Veterinary Services Department, Sewerage Services Department and Indah Water Konsortium Sdn Bhd and the Department of Environment.

Law said the DOE's task was to monitor the water quality and enforce the laws to ensure industrial effluents and discharges were within standards.

It is currently monitoring 120 rivers nationwide with 900 stations.

"We are trying our best (to protect the rivers) but the number of illegal factories, for example, is increasing annually. This is causing further deterioration to the water quality."

Although enforcement is important, the sources of pollution have to be tackled. These include preventing haphazard development, and introducing land use planning.

The DOE has no control over these as land and river matters come within State jurisdiction.

Law said the DOE had carried out studies to prepare a river-cleaning and management plan for Sungai Melaka, Sungai Galing and Sungai Terengganu.

"It looks like we have to do more than just monitoring and enforcing the law," he said.

For a start, the DOE is working out a rehabilitation and management plan

for rivers near the KLIA and the Sultan Abdul Aziz Shah Airport. These include Sungai Sepang, Sungai Buloh and Sungai Damansara.

The effort is expected to cost about RM3 million.

"We are giving a serious thought to using the same method for other rivers in the country. The plan has to include all the relevant departments, one of which will have to take a leading role," said Law.

He will also urge State Governments to start adopting a river each for rehabilitation purposes.

The proposal will be made at this month's meeting between Law and state executive councillors in charge of the environment.

On the "blackish" river, Law said air surveillance by the DOE and the police air wing unit last Friday revealed that Sungai Sepang and Sungai Damansara both appeared black.

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