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New panel to oversee highlands to be set up

Deborah Loh

KUALA LUMPUR, Thurs. - A permanent committee on highland protection will be set up under the Science, Technology and Environment Ministry.

The new entity will take over from the Cabinet Committee on Highland and Island Development formed in 2000 to conduct assessments and issue guidelines.

Minister Datuk Seri Law Hieng Ding said the Cabinet had approved the formation of a permanent body which would be able to give more attention to highland protection.

Among the duties of the new committee would be to ensure that laws on highland development were updated and relevant, he said yesterday.

This includes reviewing current environmental and development laws to mete out stiffer penalties to offenders, in the wake of Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's proposal to jail those who cleared land and cut hill slopes illegally.

"The permanent committee will have a secretariat at the ministry. Its terms of reference, functions and appointments are being discussed," Law said.

Highland protection covers a wide range of issues, including preserving water catchment areas from soil and pesticide run-off, erosion from logging and land clearing, slope stability and water supply.

In 2001, the Cabinet committee did a year-long assessment on the impact of development on Cameron Highlands and issued guidelines to ensure sustainable development.

The guidelines are applicable to all highland areas and are enforced by State Governments through local authorities.