

**El Nino: Careful Study Needed Before Declaring Bukit Merah a Disaster Area**  
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IPOH, April 25 (Bernama) -- A thorough study should be done before declaring Bukit Merah, about 90 km from here, a disaster area following the receding water level in the Tasik Bukit Merah Dam due to the El Nino phenomenon.

Minister in the Prime Minister's Department, Datuk Seri Shahidan Kassim said normally, a location would be declared a disaster zone if it was hit by a disaster like flood or large-scale fire.

"When such a declaration is made, it means they (the affected residents) have the right to receive aid such as compassionate payment," he said when contacted Monday.

The minister said if the dwindling water level in a dam adversely affected farmers, it would be the responsibility of the Agriculture and Agro-based Industry Ministry to study the situation and take follow-up action.

However, Shahidan said, he would be visiting the affected areas at Bukit Merah soon to see for himself the effects of the El Nino phenomenon.

He was asked to comment on the statement by Perak Menteri Besar Datuk Seri Zambry Abd Kadir on Sunday that the state government would apply to the federal government to declare Bukit Merah a disaster zone.

Zambry said with such a declaration, he hoped the National Security Council (MKN) could assist farmers in the Kerian area assess the losses incurred due to the depleting water level in the Bukit Merah Dam.

However, MKN secretary Datuk Seri Alias Ahmad told Bernama that it was no longer the agency responsible for assessing any damage or losses incurred by any party in a disaster.

Instead, he said, that responsibility was taken over by the National Disaster Management Agency which was set up last year.

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