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Degazetting a forest reserve 'can take years'

SHAH ALAM: While the fate of Kuala Langat North Forest Reserve (KLNFR) is hanging by a thread, those opposed to its proposed degazettement can take heart in the knowledge that the process of withdrawing the protected status of a forest reserve can take years to complete.

As Selangor Forestry Department (JPNS) director Datuk Ahmad Fadzil Abdul Majid puts it, it is not that easy to degazette a permanent forest reserve (HSK).

Reiterating this point during an exclusive interview with Bernama at his office here recently, he said: "That's the reality... due to the difficulties involved, degazettement processes (of HSK) in the past have taken years."

One of the main reasons for the time-consuming process is meeting the criteria for degazetting a forest reserve, the most important of which is securing tracts of land of equivalent or higher value to replace the one earmarked for degazettement, as required under Section 12 of the National Forestry Act 1984.

Under the current circumstances in Selangor, finding a suitable replacement for a HSK that is facing degazettement is not an easy task due to the limited availability of land in the state, as well as the Selangor government's unwavering commitment to protecting its natural resources and ensuring that the total land area designated as HSK is maintained at not less than 30 per cent.

KLNFR, which is located in Mukim Tanjung 12 in Kuala Langat district, Selangor, came under scrutiny when JPNS issued a notice early last year to secure public views on a proposal by the state government to degazette the forest reserve. However, to date, no decision has been made on the proposal.

KLNFR – mainly comprising 8,000-year-old peat swamps that serve as a valuable carbon sink – used to spread over 7,246.96 hectares of land. Today, only 957.63 hectares are left, out of which the state government hopes to degazette 931.17 hectares as per its proposal for development purposes.

Not only are environmental

non-governmental agencies and the local communities living on the fringes of KLNFR dead set against the proposal to degazette the valuable forest tract, even federal government agencies such as the Ministry of Energy and Natural Resources and Forest Research Institute of Malaysia are opposing it.

Apart from that, the Selangor State Legislative Assembly passed a resolution last year urging the state government to protect the status of its forests gazetted as forest reserves. The resolution received the unanimous support of the assembly members from both sides of the political divide.

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"I want to make it clear... it's not easy to degazette an HSK. Getting approval (for the degazettement) is not something that can be done with the snap of a finger. This is because it has to go through various processes and studies also have to be done. This is why it can take years," Ahmad Fadzil said.

He also stressed that the degazettement of an HSK will not proceed if the authorities concerned are not able to replace it with another tract of land.

"The process of withdrawing an HSK's forest reserve status and replacing it with land of equivalent size or more has to be done simultaneously. For example, if a 100-hectare HSK is going to be degazetted, then it has to be replaced with another tract measuring 100 hectares or more. In Selangor, this condition must be met," he added.

He also said that JPNS would oppose any proposal to degazette an HSK if there is no strong basis for it and if it lacks socio-economic benefits.

"In fact, we are constantly working to expand the size of our existing HSK," he said.

Due to the difficulty in meeting the criteria, only three tracts of HSK have been degazetted in Selangor over the last decade, comprising Bukit Lagong Forest Reserve (3,164 hectares), Ulu Gombak Forest Reserve (20.03 hectares) and Rantau Panjang Forest Reserve (1,589 hectares).

The withdrawal of forest reserve status from these three tracts, however, did not impact the state's 30 per cent forest reserve policy. — Bernama