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Climate change and water: Protect forests and reduce water loss

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SAM is greatly alarmed by the news on the sharp drop of the water level of dams in Penang and Kedah over the last two months. The water level capacity of the Air Itam and Teluk Bahang dams on the Penang Island was reported to stand at 62 and 39 per cent currently. Meanwhile in Kedah, the capacity of its Ahning, Podu, Muda, Boris and Malut dams was recorded at 62 per cent, 48 per cent, 18 per cent, 81 per cent and 86 per cent, respectively.

According to the Penang Water Supply Corporation (PBAPP), between September and December 2019, the total rainfall recorded in the Air Itam dam area was only 702 mm. This was equivalent to only 44 per cent of the three year average of 1,577 mm, recorded during the same period between 2016 and 2018. For the Teluk Bahang dam, the total rainfall recorded in the dam area between September and December 2019 was 1,732 mm, equivalent to only 56 per cent of the same three-year average of 3,010mm.

We definitely agree with the assessment of the chief executive officer of PBAPP that the low rainfall in Penang in the last four months of 2019 is linked to climate change. Today, we have to accept that climate change is the new normal.

In light of this human-made global disaster, a more integrated approach to water resource management can no longer be treated lightly by the federal and state governments. While we laud the call for consumers not to waste water, to address the reality of this new normal, appropriate policy and governance play a central role.

The simplest and most cost-effective step that must be urgently undertaken today is certainly natural conservation at the source. We agree with the chair of the National Water Services Commission's (SPAN), YB Charles Santiago, that water catchment areas are fully gazetted so that the ecology of the areas are not compromised.

In Peninsular Malaysia, subsection 10(f) of the National Forestry Act 1984 provides states with the power to gazette Water Catchment Forests within the Permanent Reserved Forest (PRF). However, based on the latest statistics which we could find thus far, it is shown that in 2015, only 734,731 hectares of the PRF have been gazetted as Water Catchment Forests. The total size of the PRF back then and up until 2018, still stands at 4.8 million hectares.

Currently, 3 million hectares of the PRF have been reserved for production activities such as logging and monoculture plantations.

Second, there is also the urgent need for Malaysia to put a stop to its high annual rates of non-revenue water (NRW). NRW is the amount of treated water that flows into a supply system but fails to bring in revenue. This is water that has been lost to piping leakages, system pressure, metering and billing inefficiencies and theft.

For over more than two decades, it has been the norm for our annual national NRW rates to not be reduced to less than 30 per cent, despite millions that had been spent. According to SPAN, the rate of our NRW in 2017 still stood at 35 per cent, which to us is highly improper. While Penang fared better at keeping its NRW figure lower than the national average at 22 per cent, Kedah lost almost half of its water during this year. In fact, the five worst NRW rates in the country in 2017 were held by Kedah (48 per cent), Kelantan (49 per cent), Pahang (48 per cent), Perlis (63 per cent) and Sabah (54 per cent). This current state of affairs is simply unacceptable and in fact, downright dangerous, considering our future circumstances.

Therefore, at this juncture when the impacts of climate change have begun to make their presence felt, SAM calls for the intensification and increased integration of efforts on the sustainable management of our water resources by both the federal and state authorities. Expanding on conservation at the source through the urgent gazetting our water catchment forests to legally protect them, and reducing our NRW rates, are the simplest first steps that can be undertaken by our authorities today. Likewise, efforts by agencies such as SPAN must also be amply supported to further enhance the protection of our water resources and ensure good water quality.

We have had enough warnings about the precarious and vulnerable situation of our water resources. We must therefore act before the time becomes too late, and the situation too dangerous.

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