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'Speed up mitigation of illegally cleared land'

EROSION PLAN: MPPP tells landowner to follow geotechnical recommendations

LOOI SUE-CHERN

THE landowner of the illegally cleared land in Bukit Relau here has been told to speed up its mitigation works and overcome any pollution issue at the site.

The Penang Island Municipal Council (MPPP), in a statement by its public relations division on Tuesday, said the owner had also been told to comply with recommendations made by the state's Hillside Geotechnical Advisory Panel chairman, Dr Gue See Sew.

Gue, a geotechnical expert, had visited the site with MPPP officers and representatives of the landowner last Saturday.

He recommended that the landowner appoint consultants to prepare an erosion and sedimentation control plan and slope-strengthening design to mitigate landslips and mud pollution.

He said mitigation measures should include the building of a few catchment and sediment basins along the access road to the site; cutting the slope to reduce its steepness; and covering the exposed slope with vegetation.

Gue prescribed cascading drains along the road to disperse the energy of surface runoff and mitigate soil erosion.

"A letter dated June 11 has been issued to the landowner to speed up the mitigation work on the site and see to Gue's recommendations."

MPPP also confirmed that earthworks had stopped at the site, with only mitigation works going on.

However, heavy rain in Penang earlier this week has sparked concern about the illegally cleared hill land, with non-governmental organisation Citizens Awareness Chant Group (Chant) stressing that soil erosion risks must be checked to prevent loss of lives and property.

Chant urged MPPP to work with federal agencies like the Forest Research Institute Malaysia for advice and assistance, as the agencies might have more experience in handling hillslope disaster risks.

"Any property damage or loss of lives will be due to gross negligence on the part of the local council.

"A hillslope protection programme must be put in place to tackle erosion of landslide risks," Chant said in the statement, which was emailed to MPPP and state government heads.

Chant, which has been critical about local issues and the performance of the authorities in handling them, said a daily inspection should be conducted at the site and the landowner should place people there around the clock as a precaution.

"This is a matter of public interest and we hope the agencies will work to prevent unfortunate incidents."

Chant shared a reply email by FRIM director-general Datuk Dr Abdul Latif Mohmod, who also received a copy of Chant's statement.

Latif wrote that monsoon drains were needed on the hill to channel excess water away from the hill during torrential rain, a job that the Public Works Department could help MPPP with.

He said a long-term strategy would be to plant cover crops to prevent soil from being washed away in heavy rain.

"If need be, we can advise on the type of fast-growing tree species suitable for hillslope planting."

It was reported that the land, which was cleared earlier this year without council permit, was rezoned last year to allow for low-density housing developments.