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Respect Sabah's forestry rights, Department tells Minister

KOTA KINABALU: Sabah Forestry Department Director Datuk Sam Mannan said there is no lack of raw materials so long as furniture manufacturers are prepared to pay the market price for logs.

He said the processing industry had been subsidised through preferential royalty rates since the beginning of the 20th century and furniture manufacturers had been advised to grow their own trees or engage tree growers for supplies.

Mannan said this in response to Science, Technology and Innovation Minister Datuk Seri Wilfred Madius Tangau's statement on Nov. 13 that Sabah's furniture industry could not grow due to lack of raw materials.

According to him, the proposal of the Minister that the Federal Forest Research Institute of Malaysia (FRIM) set up a division to do research in Sabah, especially Acacia Mangium from the nursery to

harvesting of the timber, is also uncalled for.

Mannan said forestry is a state matter and the Minister's suggestion contradicts existing policies to devolve more authority to the State. Thus, the setting up of a branch here is not allowed, as it will allow "a quasi federalisation of the forestry."

"The constitutional rights of Sabah, vis-a-vis, forestry, must, therefore, be respected and not interfered with.

"The Minister has made an uncalled for suggestion bent on running down Sabah's own institutions and achievements and

coming from someone from Sabah?"

He noted the Forest Research Centre (FRC) of the Forestry Department Sabah, has conducted research in all aspects of the acacia industry, since the Forestry Department introduced the species to Sabah in the 1960s.

This included a tree breeding and improvement project, carried out by the FAO/UNDP in the 1980s and similarly through a World Bank project covering the Bengkoka Peninsula.

And research carried out by foreign plantation forestry experts here has resulted in some of the finest stands of Acacias in the country, which is owned by the Sabah Forestry Development Authority, he pointed out.

"In addition, the main Acacia growers in Sabah like SFI, Sabah Softwoods, Asian Forestry Company, Safoda and Yayasan Sabah in collaboration with the Forestry Department, conduct continuous research on their own, or in concert, to improve the husbandry and vigour of the forest plantation industry, emphasising exotic species and such information is shared amongst tree growers," he said.

Mannan said the department is now focusing more on native species such as the indigenous Albizia, Laran, Binuang, Sengkuang, Magas and other fast growing local species, to provide a balance in the mix of planting and for bio-security, to avoid dependence on a single species, in case of serious disease outbreaks.

"Besides that, local species have higher value and are ecologically more stable.

The main tree growers are now switching away from acacias due to a fatal fungal disease in Sabah.

"Spending disproportionately on intensive research, on what is basically a weed species, of high invasive characteristics, is a waste of resources. A failed Acacia plantation is unheard of in Sabah - burnt, high fire risk Acacia plantations, are nevertheless, plenty," he said.

He said all of the department's research has been organised with close collaboration with the industry, adding for instance its collaboration with the Borneo Forestry Co-operative the last few years had gone further more than just its Forest Management Unit (FMU) licensees, but also to plant and produce high quality timber through coordinated research.

Meanwhile Mannan said gangs acting alone are believed to be behind the illegal felling of timber at the Lower Kinabatangan Wildlife Sanctuary.

He believed it is done by lone wolf gangs who knew the sanctuary well and may have used the timber for own use or perhaps sales, revealing that such instances have happened from time to time in sporadic manner inside the sanctuary.

"One new tree was felled in Lot 5 and the timber processed into planks, three old stumps were found and residues cut into planks and one naturally fallen tree was found and similarly re-processed at site into planks.

"All were *Merbau*, a hard species. In Lot 6, seven trees of various species were felled, six of which were abandoned and a tree processed into planks," he said in a statement on the department's findings over alleged encroachment in the area.

On Nov 11, during the opening of the International Heart of Borneo Conference he said the department will investigate reports from the Danau Firang Field Center that activities threatening wildlife and illegal felling of timber had happened in the sanctuary.

He said that he was unaware of such activities happening, but confirmed instances of wildlife poaching did happen there before.

Mannan believed that such occurrences would be reduced once the Riverine Patrol Unit becomes active early next year.

According to him, whatever logs or planks found at site had earlier been seized.

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