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Press Release

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SAM shocked that EIA for Lanthanide mining approved in Environmentally Sensitive Area

SAM is shocked to learn of news that the Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) report for the rare earth lanthanide mining project in Hulu Perak was approved last week, when it was earlier reported on the Department of Environment's (DOE) website that the EIA had been rejected. According to the EIA which has now been approved, the project is to involve 2161 hectares, which is massive, making it possibly the largest in the country.

Perak Menteri Besar Saarani Mohamad was reported to have said yesterday that the mineral could be another source of revenue for the state and that the "pilot project" on state land will determine if there will be harmful radioactivity from mining.

For the Perak MB to say that the pilot project will determine whether the lanthanide involves radioactivity or not is misleading, since the EIA itself already shows the presence of thorium in the soil sample tested.

Already the naturally occurring radioactive Thorium (Th-228) of tested soil sample from the land owned by Perbadanan Pembangunan Pertanian Negeri Perak (PPPNNP)/ land parcel PT1764 is reported to be above the regulated 1 Bq/g. Any uncontrolled accidental release of reactants (e.g., sulfuric acid) during set-up and operations could have catastrophic consequences.

This will directly affect the local communities and their access to drinking water. The project will be using Ammonium Sulphate as the key chemical, and the groundwater modelling result already showed high risk of ammonium and sulphate contamination in Well 2 and 3 used by plantation PPPNNP and FELCRA within the proposed mining area.

Also of major concern is the contamination rivers, which are an important water source for the local communities at nearby settlements from Kg. Pong and Kampung Orang Asli Bukit Asu who also fish and carry out recreation activities. We understand that the project is located in the headwaters of the Sg. Rui, a tributary of Sg Perak. Therefore, any degradation of the surface water or groundwater resulting from the proposed mining could affect the whole or a very large portion of these watersheds and their ecosystems.

Radioactivity aside, how can such a mining project be allowed in a highly environmentally sensitive area which is in the Central Forest Spine (CFS) range, and has been classified as an Environmentally Sensitive Area Rank 1?

To avoid significant disturbance and damage to the surrounding environment, only controlled activities like low impact nature tourism, research and education purposes activities are allowed within ESA Rank 1 area and mining cannot be considered as a low impact activity.

SAM had opposed the proposed project precisely for this reason when we submitted our comments to the DOE in August last year.

Approving such mining activity in an ESA Rank 1 ecosystem is most outrageous, and in violation of the federal government's own planning policy and can in no way be viewed as a sustainable activity.

In particular, the proposed activity has a high risk of increasing the concentration of ammonium and thorium, which is a radioactive substance in the existing environment.

The Perak MB and the DOE must explain how the EIA was approved despite the concerns raised and what the response is to public feedback and comments, including that from SAM.

The Perak state is already home to a radioactive permanent waste facility in the Kledang Range that contains dangerous and harmful wastes of thorium and uranium, inherited from the notorious Asian Rare-Earth (ARE) plant that operated in Bukit Merah, Ipoh during the mid-1980s to 1990s.

These wastes will remain radioactive for billions of years and pose high risks already to the people of Perak.

It is most shocking that the Perak state government and the DOE have not learnt the tragic lessons of the ARE plant that resulted in serious radioactive poisoning in the Bukit Merah community, with high incidences of deaths among children who suffered from leukaemia and cancer, children with elevated levels of lead in their blood, and above normal rates of miscarriages among pregnant women.

Just adding the word 'sustainable' to rare-earth mining and processing does not make an inherently dangerous and risky activity safe, especially if we are talking about radioactive thorium and uranium wastes that remain hazardous in the environment for generations to come.

SAM calls on the Perak state government not to proceed with this proposed mining activity and earn the reputation of the state with toxic facilities for generations to come.

Putting profits before the health and environment is contrary to sustainable development and allowing such risky activity in an environmentally sensitive area is most irresponsible.

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