Unit Komunikasi Korporat

KERATAN AKHBAR

SURAT KHABAR	:	THE STAR
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Make the culprits pay dearly for this

Water disruptions are a nationwide problem but penalties for polluting the country's raw water sources are mere slaps on the wrists. The National Water Services Commission wants a National River Protection Authority along with stiffer fines and jail terms as a deterrent.

> See page 6 for report by NELSON BENJAMIN

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Hefty losses but paltry fines for water polluters

Households and industries suffered but culprits get off lightly

By NELSON BENJAMIN
nelson@thestar.com.my

JOHOR BARU: There were nine pollution cases involving the state's raw water last year, which resulted in supply disruptions to thousands of households and losses to industries, yet three companies were only fined RM300,000.

Two palm oil mills and another one involved in sand mining were issued compounds for activities that contaminated Sg Johor, a vital water source in the state.

National Water Services Commission (SPAN) chairman Charles Santiago says this is not just a problem in Johor but nationwide.

He's calling for the formation of a National River Protection Authority along with higher fines and jail for those who pollute water sources.

"People are using rivers as a rubbish bin to dump raw sewage, chemicals, chicken and pig waste and plastic," he said.

In 2019, river pollution led to a number of water disruption in several areas.

Recently, about 1.5 million residents in Klang Valley faced dry taps due to pollution at the Sungai Semenyih and Bukit Tampoi water treatment plants.

Water malodour was the reason for water cuts in Selangor in December.

Earlier in July, many Klang Valley residents had to endure two water cuts in a span of three days after the Sungai Selangor Phases 1, 2 and 3 and Rantau Panjang water treatment plants were shut down firstly following odour pollution and later the detection of diesel pollutants.

In April, the Air Ganda water treatment plant in Perak also had to be closed after traces of arsenic were discovered.

The treatment plant provides water to about 312 users in Kampung Ayer Ganda.

In January last year, sand-mining activities in Sungai Johor were found to be the culprit behind a 30-hour water disruption in several areas in Johor Baru.

The activity caused river pollution which disrupted water treatment at the Semangar plant, affecting 3,000 houses in Taman Desa Tebrau and the surrounding areas.

"SPAN is proposing a national authority to oversee all rivers in the country," Santiago said, adding that presently there was a problem due to the involvement of many agencies, including the Department of Environment (DOE), Drainage and Irrigation Department (DID) and the respective state regulatory authorities.

He added that the Johor government had recently formed a state river committee to combat pollution, similar to Selangor's Water Management Authority.

"We do not want to go after company workers but the owners themselves," said Santiago, hoping for the new national authority to be set up as soon as possible.

In Johor last year, a few rivers – namely Sungai Johor, Sungai Lim Tambun Besar, Sungai Lim Benut, Sungai Mangga, Sungai Berumbung, Sungai Sayong and Sungai Tebrau – were polluted.

Sungai Johor and Sungai Muar are vital sources of raw water. There are nine water treatment plants along Sungai Johor and seven along Sungai Muar.

Sungai Johor supplies water to Singapore while Sungai Muar supplies water to Melaka.

An official who declined to be named said that most of the pollution cases in the state were due to ammonia pollution from factory discharge, animal farms and waste from landfills.

The latest water source pollution was detected at Sungai Muar on New Year's Eve, which left 35,000 local residents with no water supply for six days.

Johor International Trade, Investment and Utilities Committee chairman Jimmy Puah Wee Tse said supply was fully restored on Sunday but water service operator Ranhill SAJ was still working on improving the water quality.

Although some consumers had complained of getting "murky" water, the quality of supply met the standards set by the Health Ministry, he said in a statement.

Puah said the ammonia pollution, which was detected on Dec 31, is believed to have happened after contaminants from an industrial effluent retention pond in the Segamat II industrial estate flowed into Sungai Kenawar, Sungai Chodan and then Sungai Muar.

He said investigations into the cause were underway.