

Log ban in PHL: Total or selective

By Jonathan L. Mayuga | Business Mirror | FEBRUARY 19, 2017



In Photo: A forest ranger watches over pine-tree forest in Baguio City.

Last week President Duterte ordered the creation of a tripartite committee to study the current log-ban policy and called an intensified campaign against illegal logging.

The committee that will study the total log-ban policy is composed of the departments of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR), Agriculture (DA), and of the Interior and Local Government (DILG).

Environment advocates had long been calling for a total log ban, which would prohibit the cutting or harvesting of trees to prevent disasters caused by climate change-triggered extreme weather events, such as typhoons, floods and landslides, sea-level rise, tsunamis or storm surges.

The continued cutting of trees, whether legal or illegal, they said, should be stopped to let degraded forests recover from decades of abuse. This way, they said, the country would have stronger defense against natural calamities.

Against the backdrop of climate change's worst impacts, considering the country's vulnerability to extreme weather events, and the country's international commitments, specifically to reduce carbon emissions under the Paris Agreement signed in December last year, log-ban advocates said expanding the country's forest will boost the carbon-absorption capacity, and will pave the way for sustainable growth and development.

On February 14 Environment Secretary Regina Paz L. Lopez vowed to intensify the campaign against illegal logging to protect watersheds for the present and future generation.

Duterte's pronouncement and Lopez's uncompromising stance have chilling effects—that the total log ban would lead to the cancellation of various production agreements entered into by the DENR with various partners.

Lopez, an environment advocate, insists that communities are suffering because of mining, a highly extractive venture, and logging which threaten the country's functional watersheds, our source of water, seriously compromising water security. However, critics are asking whether total log ban as the right formula.

Reforestation

From 2010 to 2016, under the Aquino administration, the government spent over P30 billion to implement a massive reforestation program called the National Greening Program (NGP).

The previous administration claimed its successful implementation, earning international recognition for the Philippines in reversing the trend of environmental degradation in the country's forest.

The program, former Environment Secretary Ramon J.P. Paje claimed, had exceeded targets and allowed country's forest cover to grow by 1.5 million hectares, putting the country in a better position in sustaining massive reforestation program with the continuous production of planting materials.

It was also credited for creating "green jobs" through various NGP partnerships with the private sector, local government units (LGUs), academe and the community through the Community-Based Forest Management (CBFM) program.

Also, the NGP was designed not only as a climate-change mitigation and adaptation strategy. It is also an anti-poverty and food security program.

Tree species planted under the NGP include mangroves; fuel wood, to supply the country's fuel wood requirement; as well as wood to feed the country's wood industry for raw materials, on top of assorted fruit-bearing trees and cash-crops like cocoa, coffee and rubber.

Selective log ban

Created by Executive Order (EO) 26, the NGP has a twin-policy declaration in EO 23, which imposed a total log ban on natural and residual forest. However, the policy also allows selective logging, through special permits issued by the DENR, in certain areas.

It also allows tree-cutting or harvesting of timber in plantation forests established through various public-private partnerships under various

production-sharing agreements, such as Community Based Forest Management Agreements (CBFMAs), Integrated Forest Management Agreements (Ifmas) and Socialized Industrial Forest Management Agreements (Sifmas).

The DENR, through the Forest Management Bureau (FMB), also encourages backyard tree farming to boost the supply of the wood industry with quality wood for both upstream and downstream industry, including furniture making.

Nonetheless, the DENR said that the enforcement of EO 23 had positive impacts, with the number of illegal logging hot spots going down from 197 in 2010 to just 27 in December 2015.

A resurgence of illegal logging, however, were observed in the Sierra Madre Mountain Range, particularly in Quezon and Rizal provinces, including Isabela and forested areas in Mindanao.

Lopez herself said she is open to the idea of establishing more plantation forests to ensure the sustainable local supply of wood—one way to stop illegal logging in natural and residual forests—adding that logging should be done only in designated areas.

Wood is life

The Philippine Wood Producers Association (PWPA) said there is more to reforestation than enhancing the country's protection against climate change-triggered extreme weather events.

PWPA Executive Director Maila R. Vasquez said forest, where trees—basically wood—all come from, is a renewable resource. It is better to manage the forest and use wood to support the life of the \$5.03-billion wood industry.

PWPA is the national association of corporations, partnerships and individuals involved in forest management, logging, forest plantation development, manufacture of lumber, veneer and plywood, pulp and paper and other wood products, as well as in trading, shipping and sales of these products.

“Wood is the most ‘green’ product. When you cut trees, and use wood, you actually help not only the industry, but the people who depend on the industry. Even small tree-farmers depend on tree-farming for income,” she said.

The life of the industry, she said, depends on sustainable supply of raw materials.

With the current policy banning the cutting of trees from natural and residual forest, the industry is already importing more than half of its annual wood-supply requirement from other countries, Vasquez said.

She said a total log ban will definitely hurt the industry more and may not be able to survive if it will become completely dependent on imported wood.

“A total log ban prohibiting cutting of trees in plantation forests will really hurt the industry. Right now, the industry is already importing more than half of the industry’s demand for roundwood,” Vasquez said.

Supply and demand

Currently, the wood industry vastly gets its local supply from forest plantations, where specific species of trees are planted on a massive scale for timber and wood supply.

The private sector and individuals may venture in plantation forests using private lands, as well as public lands, once given access by the government.

According to the DENR's FMB, there are around 140 Ifmas covering 1,005,000 hectares; 1,529 Sifmas covering around 32,000 hectares; and 1,884 CBFMAs covering 1,615,000 hectares.

These, however, do not necessarily produce the desired volume of timber.

It takes around 60,000 mature forest a year to cover the wood industry's wood-supply needs, including exports currently estimated at 5.3 million cubic meters of wood.

But Vasquez said in an earlier interview that to ensure the sustainable supply of wood that would cover the country's export requirements, around 500,000 hectares of mature forest is needed annually.

The country's current wood-production capacity is 1 million cubic meter; 4.3 million cubic meter of wood are imported.

Vasquez said there are a lot of potential investors who are willing and able to venture into plantation forest.

However, she said the government needed to ensure a business-friendly policy environment and guarantee the investments would be safeguarded, and the contracts with the private sector are honored.

The only way to gain the trust and confidence of potential investors is for the government to put in place measures that will make plantation forests economically viable and safe from policy changes every time a new administration takes over, she said.

Sustainable forest management

Tom Valdez, president of the Society of Filipino Foresters Inc., an organization of more than 9,000 forestry experts and professionals, both in public and private sector, said total log ban will not solve the problem of illegal logging.

“The solution to illegal logging is not the total log ban. Poverty is prevalent in upland areas. And the government cannot possibly guard the country’s vast forest,” Valdez, a forestry expert, said.

He said even “selective logging” under EO 23 failed to address illegal logging. He said the solution is sustainable forest management.

“The government should allow investment in forestry, particularly in open areas. Leave the natural forest alone. Preserve the protected areas and conserve what can be conserved—the buffer zones of protected areas,” he said. Buffer zones are multi-use of areas wherein government regulation for the use of natural resources is imperative.

According to Valdez, forest growth should go beyond the allowable cut to ensure forest expansion.

Fighting climate change

According to PWPA, there are two ways to combat climate change. One is by reducing carbon-dioxide emission, and another by enhancing carbon-absorption capacity by expanding forest and using wood.

The cutting of trees, Vasquez said, does not necessarily mean the carbon sink is reduced.

“Since forest is renewable, all you have to do is replace the trees. The carbon in the trees that you cut are still intact.”

PWPA said 1 ton of wood can store 1 ton of carbon.

Valdez said since forest is a carbon sink, continuously expanding the country's forest means we are on the right track in fighting climate change.

He said studies show that the average carbon footprint of every Filipino is 900 kilograms. "To offset that, every Filipino will have to plant and nurture at least 100 trees," he said.

Wood, itself, is carbon sink. Hence, cutting trees and using the wood for building, construction and furniture, also help in increasing the country's carbon-absorption capacity, he said.

"When you plant, it absorbs carbon dioxide. When you cut, you stock carbon dioxide. Then you replant again," he explained.

He said there is also a proper way to cut trees so as not to kill the tree.

"Don't cut beyond the increment... We should practice sustainable yield cutting. We should not cut lower than 30 centimeters in diameter. The mother trees should be left to provide seeds. In one hectare, set aside a portion and leave the mother trees to ensure continuous planting," he said partly in Filipino.

In managing plantations, Valdez said planning is also important. "Planting should be by rotation. If you have reached the commercial volume, the rotation should be 15 years. It means harvest should be done annually, and planting is also annually. The volume of carbon dioxide is 50 percent of the dry weight of the wood," he said partly in Filipino, explaining how much carbon can be stored in every tree that is cut down and preserved by building houses and furniture.

After all, wood is a renewable resource. Unless burned or destroyed, planting trees and using wood can be the ultimate solution to climate change.

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