

Possible log-ban order sends chills to wood producers

By Jonathan L. Mayuga

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Environment Secretary Regina Paz L. Lopez said she is waiting for President Duterte's marching orders on the possible declaration of a total log ban "with no exceptions" that would possibly include forest plantations.

Asked about Duterte's marching orders, Lopez said in a text message, "None yet. But there will be no cutting of trees in natural forests and protected areas. That is clear."

Lopez, however, told the BusinessMirror that she has no problem with logging "if it is done with the prescribed way," adding that the wood industry should not "take off more than we can produce."

"There has to be designated areas [for logging]," she said.

Lopez, an environmental advocate, continues to enjoy Palace support on the issue of mine closures and suspension orders, even as the Chief Executive assured mining companies affected by the closure of "due process".

Duterte's directive during the Climate Change Commission and Advisory Board en banc meeting in Malacañang forming a tripartite convergence committee to study current logging policy "with no exception" is sending chilling effects on the local wood industry.

The directive came after parts of Mindanao, particularly Surigaodel Norte, went under floodwaters after days of heavy rains in January. Experts blame mining and logging for degradation of the forests that led to the severe flooding.

Agriculture Secretary Emmanuel F. Piñol, in one of his Facebook posts, quoted Duterte as giving Lopez full authority to implement the total log ban.

The tripartite committee composed of the departments of Environment and Natural Resources, Agriculture and Local Government (DILG) was supposed to meet on February 6.

Imposing a total log ban that would prohibit cutting of trees, including in areas covered by special permits from the government, as well as private forest plantations, would yet again land a serious, possibly fatal blow to the country's \$5.03-billion wood industry.

The private sector can access public lands and establish plantation forest through Integrated Forest Management Agreement (Ifma) and Socialized Industrial Forest Management Agreement (Sifma).

There are around 140 Ifmas covering 1,005,000 hectares; 1,529 Sifma covering around 32,000 hectares.

The government also has a total of 1,884 Community-Based Forest Management Agreements with various non-governmental organizations, people's organizations and community-based groups covering 1,615,000 hectares.

Maila Vasquez, executive director of the Philippine Wood Producers Association Inc. (PWPA) said the local wood industry is still reeling from Aquino administration's total log-ban policy, which bans harvesting of trees from natural and residual forests, with the signing of Executive Order (EO) 23 in 2011.

Vasquez expressed hope that the Duterte administration will consult various stakeholders, particularly the local wood industry, before issuing a national logging policy that will deter the industry's growth.

"Imposing a total log ban, including private plantations, will definitely hurt the industry," she said.

"We are not sure whether the government is planning to ban cutting in commercial tree plantations. But definitely, it will affect not only owners of commercial tree plantations but tree-farmers, as well," she said.

Vasquez said the local wood industry is already importing more than half of the supply from other countries. Prohibiting commercial tree plantations to cut trees, she said, would make the country totally dependent on imported wood.

To meet the local demand for wood, the Forest Management Bureau (FMB) said at least 60,000 hectares of mature forest plantations. This also requires a forest expansion of 300,000 annually.

"If the government will ban logging even in tree-plantations, the local wood industry will be severely affected," she said.

Vasquez said the PWPA has been batting for a business-friendly policy environment for the local wood industry to flourish through the establishments of more commercial tree plantations.

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.

She said the only way for the wood industry to survive and grow is by continuously planting more trees for commercial and industrial use in private.

The DENR is currently implementing a nationwide reforestation program called Enhanced-National Greening Program (E-NGP) in partnership with various sectors.

Various programs of the DENR is anchored on forest protection and expansion through Community-Based Forest Management (CBFM) program.

She said the issue of deforestation should not be an emotional issue, saying the establishment of commercial tree plantations is not the problem, but the solution to deforestation.

“Wood is renewable. If you cut wood, you can always plant to replace the trees. It is renewable. What we need is to plant more trees,” she said.

The use of wood, she said, is, in fact, environment and climate friendly, because wood is a carbon sink, unless burned or destroyed, she said using wood for construction and other purpose, such as making furniture, preserves carbon sink, thus preventing greenhouse gas emission into the atmosphere.

Even now that the local wood industry is allowed to operate and cut trees from commercial tree-plantations, the Philippines is already importing more than half of the required wood supply.

She stressed that the local wood industry rely on legal wood grown in commercial-tree plantations.

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