

# Expert: PHL should implement sustainable forest management to end illegal logging

*By Jonathan L. Mayuga  
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Environment Secretary Regina Paz L. Lopez has vowed to intensify the campaign against illegal logging to protect the country's watershed areas, a campaign which may be doomed to fail unless measures promoting investment in sustainable forest management is put in place, a forestry expert said.



*In Photo: Forest cleared for agriculture in Palanan, Isabela.*

The renewed drive against illegal logging is in line with President Duterte's marching order to enforce a total log ban, especially within watersheds, following massive flooding in Agusan and other Caraga provinces last month.

"We will intensify the campaign against illegal logging, and Victor Corpuz will lead the task force," Lopez told reporters at a news conference, as she announced the cancellation of 75 mineral production sharing agreements (MPSAs) and the Tampakan Copper-Gold Project Financial and/or Technical Assistance (FTAA) at the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) early this week.

The official earlier blamed the flooding in Agusan, which prompted the government to implement forced evacuation in Agusan del Sur, to the destruction brought by logging and mining in the area.

The cancellation of the MPSAs, a preventive measure, aims to protect and conserve the country's fresh-water supply, against the impact of mining operations, Lopez pointed out.

### **Resurgence**

DENR Undersecretary and National Anti-Environmental Crime Task Force Head Arturo Valdez admitted the resurgence of illegal logging activities, and vowed to mount the campaign in so-called illegal logging hot spots.

Executive Order (EO) 23 signed by former President Benigno S. Aquino III prohibits the cutting and harvesting of trees in natural and residual forests. The logging ban and intensified campaign under the Aquino administration, according to the DENR had reduced the number of illegal logging hot spots from 197 to just 27.

The DENR donated the confiscated hot logs to the Department of Education and were later crafted to make school furniture.

Acknowledging Duterte's order to study the current policy against illegal logging, Lopez vowed there will be "no letup" in the campaign, with Corpuz leading the charge.

Lopez plans to use the budget for the Enhanced National Greening Program to create more green jobs and help would-be affected miners with the impending closure of 23 large-scale metallic mines and suspension of five others, pending a review by the Mining Industry Coordinating Council.

### **'Condemnation'**

Mining industry's big players under the Chamber of Mines of the Philippines (COMP), which has filed an opposition before the Commission on Appointments to block Lopez's confirmation, had said that 1.2 million people are "condemned to hunger and poverty" with Lopez's actions.

COMP argued that private sector and mining companies have planted the most number of trees—over 2 million—in the last five years in support of the government's massive reforestation program.

It also claimed that mining companies implement progressive rehabilitation in mine sites and tapped local communities in the creation of green jobs and livelihood opportunities.

### **More PPCPs**

Meanwhile, Tom Valdez, president of Society of Filipino Foresters Inc., said imposing a total log ban will not address illegal logging.

Instead of a total log ban, Valdez said the government should implement sustainable forest management and allow the private sector to help in the reforestation through the establishment of more forest plantations and public-private-community partnership (PPCP).

“Since EO 23 was enforced, did it really stop illegal logging? *Baka nga lumala pa,*” Valdez, a graduate at the University of the Philippines Los Baños who worked as a forester for 13 years before joining the San Roque Power Corp., pointed out.

Speaking mostly in Tagalog, Valdez, who sits as cochairman of the Interim National Government Board for Establishment of a Philippine Forest Certification System, said he supports the massive reforestation of the country’s degraded and denuded forest.

The board, which is composed of representatives from the wood industry, non-governmental organizations, civil-society organizations, and the Society of Filipino Foresters and concerned national government agencies such as the DENR and the Department of Trade and Industry, is currently organizing and building the capabilities of the wood industry and forestry sector.

He said the people need wood and cutting of trees for fuel alone cannot be stopped by the government. At the same time, Valdez said the wood industry is already importing more than half of its wood supply to sustain the wood industry.

As a forester himself, he added the government has no capacity to protect the country’s vast forest and would need the support of the private sector and the community.

### **Investment**

Valdez said the government should open up its community-based forest management (CBFM) areas to private-sector investment, reinforcing the program that will be beneficial to the wood industry, as well as the community.

This will also help lessen the burden on the part of the government in terms of covering more areas for reforestation.

“The government should allow private-sector investment to come in by opening CBFMs. The private companies will invest and provide technical training, while the communities will have jobs. A sharing scheme can be forged for mutual benefit,” he told the BusinessMirror in a telephone interview.

Valdez echoed the concerns aired by the Philippine Wood Producers Association on the possible declaration of a total log ban that will include plantation forests established by the private sector,

individuals and NGOs in government lands through the integrated forest management agreements and socialized industrial forest management agreements and CBFMAs.

“For public-sector investment in forest rehabilitation to flow in, we need the private sector and community support. But first, we need an enabling policy environment to build investor confidence,” he explained.

Valdez said measures should be enacted by Congress to protect the private-sector investment in forest rehabilitation that will boost forestry contribution to the country’s growth and development, and its contribution to the economy in terms of exports, jobs and livelihood opportunities.

He added the country is now import-dependent and forestry’s contribution to the economy is miniscule. This, he said, is because the country’s forest is already denuded, and cutting in natural forests is prohibited under EO 23.

“*Kasi wala ng cutting. Walang supply. Halos wala. Meron siguro [supply] iyong imported from other countries,*” he said.

According to Valdez, forestry’s contribution to the economy will increase, eventually, but this should start with an admission that, in the past, the forests were gravely abused, and that this time we have the opportunity to bring it back.

Valdez said the Society of Filipino Foresters and the Philippine Networks of Forestry Schools are developing the sustainable forestry road map—a private-sector initiative.

“We will present it in October during a convention in Davao,” he said.

For investment in forestry to come in, Valdez said, the government should ensure that the policy is stable and that forest certification should be implemented.

Forest certification is now being done in other countries, he added, and it is high time that the Philippines had its own to ensure buyers that the trees or wood were harvested legally, and in a sustainable manner that does not harm forest ecosystems.

With abundant local wood supply and duly certified as coming from environment-friendly sources, demand for illegally logged trees will eventually stop, Valdez said.

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