

Government eyes P4-billion ‘green jobs’ program for communities affected by mines closure

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Photo from Creative Commons: Nature Travel, Adventure Travel, Ecotourism, in Davao City - Image from Islands Banca Cruises

The government is planning to spend about P4 billion to create “green jobs” in three provinces affected by mine-closure orders issued by Environment Secretary Regina Paz L. Lopez.

Around 30,000 households in the three provinces—Surigaodel Norte, Surigao del Sur and Dinagat Islands—will benefit from various programs that will be implemented by various government agencies.

An environmental advocate, Lopez said the closure of mines would not result in job losses.

On the other hand, she said, tens of thousands of people will suffer from the impacts of mining in those areas.

Lopez had earlier ordered the closure or suspension of 28 operating mines and canceled 75 mining contracts entered into by the government with large-scale mining companies, months after ordering the conduct of a mine audit with a list of criteria that includes social, environmental and biodiversity considerations.

Since then, the official gained the support of environmental and antimining groups, but is experiencing rough sailing in the powerful Commission on Appointments (CA). Some members of the CA were also irked by Lopez’s statement to the media about the alleged P50-million bribe offer to any member who will vote against her confirmation.

Lopez later recanted the alleged P50-million bribe offer, which, she said, was conveyed by a friend she declined to identify.

The Chamber of Mines of the Philippines (COMP) said the closure or suspension of the 28 mines alone will result in a huge economic setback, with 1.2 million people whose livelihood depend on mining operations being condemned to a life of hunger and poverty.

The closure or suspension order will also result in a huge drop in the country's annual mineral-production output, particularly nickel.

The Philippines is the world's single major supplier of nickel, with China as the sole major buyer for its various steel products, such as stainless steel.

The COMP, which has filed an opposition to Lopez's confirmation before the CA, said the decision to close and suspend the mines was made without due process of law, claiming that the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) chief ignored even the findings and recommendations of the various mine-audit teams.

Lopez said it is incumbent upon the government to provide alternatives for citizens who will be affected by policies.

"We want to protect the environment, and want to show that we can save lives and provide livelihood at the same time," Lopez said.

The DENR, together with 10 other government line agencies, she added, is prepared to invest close to P4 billion to provide employment opportunities for 25,000 to 30,000 households.

The other agencies include the Department of Labor and Employment, Technical Education and Skills Development Authority, Department of Agriculture, the Department of Science and Technology, Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources, Department of the Interior and Local Government, Department of Trade and Industry, Philippine Coconut Authority, Department of Public Works and Highways, and the Department of Social Welfare and Development.

"We have a very good, very doable plan that will provide employment in the short and long term, jobs that do not involve mining activities that will damage our much-needed watersheds," the DENR chief said.

Short-term employment opportunities include reforestation; desilting of agricultural land; napier and bamboo farming; livestock raising; and biochar manufacturing.

Biochar is a powerful soil enhancer that holds carbon and makes soils more fertile. It can boost food security, discourage deforestation and preserve cropland diversity. Biochar systems can reverse soil degradation and create sustainable food and fuel production in areas with severely depleted soils, scarce organic resources, and inadequate water and chemical fertilizer supplies.

Medium- and long-term jobs, on the other hand, will be generated by the manufacture of charcoal briquettes, ecotourism activities, infrastructure and agro-postharvest processing.

Lopez stressed, “Providing economic opportunities and protecting the environment are not mutually exclusive.”

“It is not one or the other; we can and should do both at the same time, because we cannot sacrifice the welfare of future generations to meet short-term economic objectives.”

The environment secretary added that experts from the Mineral Policy Center based in Washington, D.C., have referred to water as “mining’s most common casualty”.

“Any competent scientist will tell you that mining affects fresh water through the heavy use of water in processing ore, and through water pollution from discharged mine effluent and seepage from tailings and waste rock impoundments,” Lopez said.

Lopez said she hoped legislators and fellow Cabinet secretaries “look at the issue of protecting our watersheds in the long term, because we could face a very, very serious problem with water many years down the road.”

A study conducted by think tank World Resources Institute said in late-2015 that the country is in danger of experiencing water scarcity in 23 years. The study predicts the Philippines will experience a “high” degree of water shortage in the year 2040.

The Philippines is ranked 57th out of 167 countries that will likely be a water-stressed country in 2040. The study defines water stress as “the ratio between total water withdrawals and available renewable surface water at a sub-catchment level”.

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