

## DENR reviews approved reclamation projects

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MANILA, Philippines — The Department of Environment and Natural Resources is reviewing the reclamation projects that were permitted by the government to deepen its understanding of the ecological and economic impacts of these activities, its chief said Monday.

Environment Secretary Antonia Loyzaga made the statement a day after environmental and fisherfolk groups renewed their call to the government to cancel all reclamation activities, saying these projects would affect over 27,000 hectares of the country's coastal and maritime ecosystems.

Loyzaga said the agency cannot just declare those projects illegal and cancel their permits because of the opposition of some groups.

“What we're doing in the DENR is we're reviewing what had already been permitted. We're trying to understand how the lessons learned from these activities can actually inform actions and policies moving forward,” Loyzaga said in a briefing on World Environment Day.

In May, the environment department conducted an experts' forum on reclamation aiming to review and enhance government policies on dump-and-fill activities.

A month earlier, the DENR chief met with groups opposing reclamation such as Advocates of Science and Technology for the People, Kalikasan People's Network for the Environment and PAMALAKAYA as part of the agency's consultations with different sectors.

Loyzaga stressed the importance of understanding the cumulative impacts of reclamation projects.

“They were individually assessed and the overall impact [assessment] on Manila Bay and the ecosystems was not done. Therefore, this is the basis for us to be forward in terms of trying to determine whether or not we may be looking at proposed changes to the way we have permitted these projects,” she said.

Former President Rodrigo Duterte issued a directive to stop accepting applications for reclamation activities.

Reclamation 'not for the poor'

There are around 50 reclamation projects at various stages of development across the country, according to groups under People's Network for the Integrity of Coastal Habitats and Ecosystems. Of those, around 20 are in Manila Bay.

“Up to one-fourth of the Manila Bay may be destroyed due to reclamation and related projects such as seabed quarrying and dredging,” Jon Bonifacio, national coordinator of Kalikasan PNE, said in a briefing Sunday.

Scientists and environmental groups have warned that reclamation, dredging, and seabed quarrying will destroy coastal and marine habitats, resulting in a decline in fisheries production and loss of livelihood among fishers.

They also said that reclamation projects will expose coastal communities to strong cyclones and storm surge.

“It is clear that reclamation is only for a few. It exacerbates historical inequality and poverty of people. It’s time to listen to the lessons of science and history,” Bonifacio said.

The groups also called on the government to declare Manila Bay and other important marine and coastal areas “reclamation-free zones” and regular consultations with affected stakeholders.