

# Environmental protection, conservation mark ‘change’ under Duterte admin’s first 6 months

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*In Photo: Environment Secretary Regina Paz L. Lopez (center) is flanked by key members of the Cabinet, as they launch Task Force ng Kalikasan in August 2016.*

THE year 2016 saw the country witnessing a major policy shift, leaning toward environmental protection vis-à-vis natural-resource exploitation.

President Duterte, the country’s 16th president, made several tough policy pronouncements—including the launching of an all-out war against large-scale mining that causes massive destruction of the environment—during the first six months of his administration in the last half of 2016.

Finally, honoring the Paris Agreement—after he earlier called it “stupid” and “absurd”—Duterte designated environment advocate Regina Paz L. Lopez as secretary of the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR).

**Lopez: Public service, common good**

AS new DENR chief, Lopez declared her policy to promote integrity, public service and the common good, which, she said, will be the key deciding factors for any decision under her watch.

Lopez emphasized the need for the agency to be pro-active and undertake policies and programs, which will ensure that the environment is protected and that natural resources are utilized sustainably.

“The DENR will be a proactive and strategic regulatory agency that will enable the convergence of various sectors so that they may implement strategies that promote area development,” Lopez, said when she took her oath as DENR secretary in July 2016.

She also declared the need to create more space for the participation of civil society, vowing to put in place mechanisms that will guarantee the meaningful engagement of the Church, environment, non-governmental organizations, the youth, farmers and fishermen. Under her watch, Lopez vowed that the main thrusts of the DENR are institutional reform and environmental governance, community empowerment, rational minerals management, stronger biodiversity protection, proper ecological solid-waste management and efficient interagency collaboration toward clean air, clean water and transformative climate-change policies.

### **Mining audit**

Lopez’s performance at the DENR was marked by the suspension of large-scale mining operations for their failure to meet environmental standards.

Taking the cue from Duterte, Lopez issued an order for an audit of all operating mines as soon as she was sworn into office.

The new mining-audit criteria integrated social, environmental and biodiversity considerations on top of technical or physical aspects of operations.

As part of the audit, the DENR suspended 10 mining operations, while 20 others were issued show-cause orders.

Lopez has also issued an order making civil-society organizations and community-based groups part of the audit process, which triggered howls of protest from mining's big players under the Chamber of Mines of the Philippines (COMP).

The COMP said Lopez focuses too much on large-scale mining, while being lax or lenient on small-scale mining operating illegally and without paying correct taxes to the government.

### **ECCs review**

The new DENR chief also ordered a review of over 800 environmental compliance certificates (ECCs). Lopez said the policy is important to ensure that development projects would not adversely affect the environment and cause people to suffer.

As part of the review, the DENR canceled the ECCs of six mining companies and a property developer, which intended to build a housing project within the La Mesa Watershed. Lopez also issued show-cause orders to 11 companies with the threat of having their ECCs canceled.

In issuing a show-cause order to Century Properties for its housing project in the La Mesa Watershed, Lopez declared watersheds "off-limits" to development projects, particularly housing, to preserve the integrity of the environment and the country's precious water resources.

She said the La Mesa Watershed is important to the survival of 12 million people living in the National Capital Region, the same way that watersheds in other areas provide a very important economic resource to the people.

Lopez wants to develop areas as ecotourism site to maximize the economic services a healthy ecology provides to the community, more than the exploitation of natural resources.

## **‘Biodiversity is gold’**

In integrating biodiversity as part of the mining audit criteria, Lopez declared protected areas as off-limits to development projects, particularly mining, to ensure the protection and conservation of the country’s rich biodiversity.

Several mineral-production sharing agreements (MPSAs) issued by the government to mining companies are within or partly covered by protected areas, or areas set aside for conservation.

The government issued the MPSAs long ahead of the protected area declarations. Lopez said “biodiversity is gold”, and as such should be protected against destructive development projects.

## **Moratorium on fish-cage operation**

Lopez announced a one-year moratorium on fish-cage operation within the Laguna de Bay starting 2017, vowing not to renew business permits for the operation of fish cages in the country’s largest freshwater lake as part of the plan to decongest the lake.

Around 13,000 hectares of the lake’s surface are now covered by large fish cages and fish pens, exceeding the biological carrying capacity of the lake, which is 10 percent, or approximately 9,000 hectares. She said some fish-cage operators have been issued permits to operate areas covering 40 hectares up to 50 hectares, explaining why fish cages have mushroomed and exceeded its carrying capacity.

The DENR chief wants the owners of fish cages and fishpens to harvest their remaining stocks and voluntarily dismantle their structures to allow the lake to recover from decades of environmental degradation. This, she said, would also allow fishermen to catch fish in open waters.

She also promised to prioritize small fishermen in issuing business permit for fish cages and fish pens over that of companies and rich and moneyed individuals who have been raking profit from the lake's bounty for decades.

### **'For the common good'**

Lopez justifies her every decision by saying the country cannot establish an economy based on people's suffering. She said the people in the communities should benefit, first and foremost, from the country's natural resources more than business interests.

From the start, leaders of environmental groups welcomed Lopez's appointment to the DENR.

However, her appointment is expected to have rough sailing under the scrutiny of the powerful Commission on Appointments (CA). Lopez has been bypassed twice already by the CA, which observers believe is because of her uncompromising stand against irresponsible mining.

Reappointed by Duterte, Lopez vowed to continue the campaign against irresponsible mining and champion the fight against dirty coal, starting with the ratification of the Paris Agreement—which Duterte had earlier expressed reservation of but later changed his mind and promised to uphold.

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