

ENVIRONMENT

Forest chiefs defend renewal of Saraburi mining permit

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The Royal Forest Department yesterday came out to defend the latest cabinet resolution allowing the country's biggest cement-processing company to continue limestone mining in an ecologically-rich watershed area in Saraburi province.

Amnuayporn Choldumrongkul, deputy chief of the Royal Forest Department, said the decision to extend the operating permit was made in accordance with the state concession previously awarded to the company, SCG Plc, to mine there.

The department granted the right to SCG to operate the mine in the area from June 2002 until June 2011.

The facility is located in the Tab Kwang and Muak Lek Forest Reserve in Saraburi province.

The forest covers 3,223 rai and contains a large protected Watershed Class 1A zone.

Watershed Class 1A areas are designated as being ecologically rich and were given protection under a 2005 cabinet resolution. However, certain exemptions, such as this one, were made possible on a case-by-case basis.

Although its permit expired, the

company still has the right to seek its renewal as it was granted a 25-year mining concession in the area by the Industry Ministry which does not expire until April 2036, according to Ms Amnuayporn.

As a result, the forestry department must fulfil the company's request to renew its permit, she said.

"The mining concession is still valid so we have decided to extend the forest land use in the Watershed Class 1A area for a period of 10 years for limestone mining activity."

Ms Amnuayporn explained that the department has no right to deny the request as the company has fulfilled all of its legal obligations, including an Environment Impact Assessment. The National Environment Board also approved the project's environmental monitoring report, she said.

She also denied accusations that the mining area overlaps with a no-hunting portion of the forest, Kaeng Koi, which is under the Department of National Parks, Wildlife and Plant Conservation's responsibility.

However, NGO groups and conservationists have blasted the department and the cabinet.

"It is obvious that this government

is devoid of the sincerity and integrity to manage and protect this natural resource," read the official statement from a civic action group concerned with protecting national parks and areas containing mineral resources.

The group also accused the cabinet of breaching its own newly promulgated mineral resources law.

Section 17 in this new law states that mining activities are not allowed on sites located inside the national park, hunting ban areas, ancient sites, security sites or Watershed Class 1A areas.

They also asked the authorities to investigate how and why the company has been able to continue mining on the site despite its permit having expired seven years ago.

Saraburi province is a hub for the country's limestone mining industry, which supports the cement and construction businesses. However, mines are often accused of causing significant levels of air pollution as well as habitat losses as a result of the blasting that occurs.

Chalerm Prakiat district, the centre of gypsum processing plants in Saraburi province, is known as one of the areas with the worst recorded levels of air quality in the country.