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# DENR eases issuance of mining clearances in Palawan

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PUERTO PRINCESA, Philippines--The Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) has indicated that it is inclined to grant environmental compliance certificates (ECC) to mining projects locating in Palawan and give a free hand to local government units to issue the final permits, even as it urged local executives to be more permissive of mining investments.

"The ECC is a planning and management tool and is not a permit. We can only ensure that [ECC applications] have environmental safety measures...it is up to the local government units to grant the necessary permits," DENR undersecretary Joemari Gerochi told the Palawan Council for Sustainable Development (PCSD) last week.

Gerochi was reacting to concerns raised by nongovernmental organizations on the increasing number of mining applications in Palawan and its potential detrimental impact on the island's fragile environment.

He asked the PCSD, a clearing house for all environmental projects in Palawan, to hold a "mining summit" in November to enable the local government executives to evaluate mining applications properly.

He added that it was the policy of the national government to encourage the mining sector in recognition of its potential in contributing to the country's economic goals.

Gerochi's statement was lambasted by anti-mining lobby groups in Palawan, which warned that the DENR was "reneging" on its "duty to protect the environment" by its softening of its stance on issuing ECCs.

"It used to be that we can rely upon the DENR to side with the environment. Now, they are acting as brokers for the mining companies," Palawan NGO Network Inc. (PNNI) executive director Cleofe Bernardino told the Philippine Daily Inquirer, parent company of INQUIRER.net.

She warned that the DENR's stance would encourage destructive mining projects to operate in Palawan.

"If all they [DENR] want to do is to make project designs look good on paper and then grant the ECCs, they have no business being a department of the environment," Bernardino said.

She claimed that 315 mining applications have been in process, mostly at the Mining and Geosciences Bureau and the provincial government, covering a land area of over 670,000 hectares.

"We want the DENR to carefully screen out these applications so that hindi na dumating pa sa amin sa Palawan ang mga projects [so that the projects will not reach Palawan anymore]. In the first place, Palawan is not supposed to be a mining place because of its environment," she said.

Vice Governor David Ponce de Leon defended the DENR position, saying Gerochi's statement "does not mean that they are giving blanket permission" to mining companies.

"Hindi naman 'yun giving blanket approval of all ECCs. They [DENR] will still exercise regulatory functions," Ponce de Leon said.

Meanwhile, Puerto Princesa City Mayor Edward Hagedorn told the Inquirer newspaper he would stand firm on his decision to reject all mining applications in Puerto Princesa.

The city has so far received 42 applications, according to records obtained by the Inquirer, next only to the southern municipality of Aborlan which has 55 pending applications.

Hagedorn dismissed reports that the DENR was pressuring him to retract his anti-mining declaration, even as he confirmed that the DENR had asked the Department of Justice (DoJ) to issue a legal opinion on whether LGUs can reject mining applications outright.

"I think [Environment] Secretary [Lito] Atienza was never serious in trying to talk me out of our commitment to the anti-mining drive. He has not tried to reach me even by phone," Hagedorn told the Inquirer in an e-mail.

He added that he would challenge the legal opinion if it would be against the LGUs' right to ban mining in their jurisdictions.

"Even if the DoJ opinion is unfavorable, we will still stand firm on our decision not to allow mining operation within the city. Bahala na

ang court later on [The court will decide later on]," he added.

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