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6 News

Swift action needed to fix water issues

Dry taps frustrate residents, affect businesses and have negative impact on investors' confidence

WITH the water restructuring exercise for the Klang Valley further delayed, businessmen and residents feel the authorities are not serious in resolving the impending water crisis.

A businessman, who declined to be named, said both the Selangor and Federal governments should put aside their differences and get down to solving the problem.

If this goes on, consumers can only cross their fingers and hope there will not be too many disruptions to the water supply as what they endured the last few years.

Dry taps are a common occurrence in Selangor due to the lack of a buffer — the Klang Valley has a negative water reserve margin of 1.5%, way below the 20% safe margin.

The current water treatment plants in Selangor are operating beyond full capacity, and any incidence, such as contamination scare or dry spell, could quickly result in water supply disruption in the Klang Valley.

It is also common knowledge that in Selangor's case, huge volume of water is lost as a result of ageing pipes and that there is an urgent need to invest in new pipes to bring down non-revenue water (NRW) from the current 35%.

NRW for Selangor is currently estimated at RM400ml per year, where 1.5 million cubic metres is lost daily through water leakage in the distribution network. This amount is enough to serve one-third of the Selangor and Kuala Lumpur population.

As it stands, the deadline for Selangor's water restructuring exercise has been postponed from April to October 2017.

The delay in the exercise has a domino effect in tackling the low water reserve margin issue; the Federal Government will only release money for capital expenditure and pipe replacement when the restructuring exercise is concluded.

Meanwhile, the risk of breakdowns become higher when there are insufficient funds to carry out maintenance works with the overloading at present.

With this ongoing impasse between the Federal and Selangor governments, business



Lim says domestic water tariffs should be sufficient to raise money for necessary capital expenditure, such as addressing NRW losses.

operators and residents continue to brace themselves for more water cuts, especially with a dry spell expected next month. Recently, the Federation of Malaysian Manufacturers (FMM) called on the Government to consider streamlining and federalising the management of water like it did with electricity years ago.

FMM president Tan Sri Dr Lim Wee Chai said in a statement that domestic water tariffs, which varied from state to state, should reflect the true cost of water to reduce wastage and encourage conservation.

"Tariffs should also be sufficient to raise money for necessary capital expenditure such as addressing NRW losses," he said.

Lim said NRW loss in Malaysia averaged at 40% due to longstanding issues such as leakages, burst pipes and theft.

He also pointed out that water rationing and unscheduled interruptions in the last few years had adversely affected manufacturing production resulting in loss of millions of ringgit.

Lim added that investors' confidence was also affected due to the delay in resolving the water restructuring exercise involving both the Selangor and Federal governments.



Water cuts, especially when unscheduled, are a great inconvenience to the public. — filepic



Residents frustrated with delays and disruptions

Section 14 (Jalan 141-1415) Residents Association (RA) chairman Selva Sugumaran Perumal said residents were frustrated with the frequent water cuts and the delay in replacing Peilang Jaya's ageing pipes.

"The water concessionaires are supposed to replace a certain length of the pipes each year, but they have not done so.

"It is unfair to spend taxpayers' money for repairs when the water problems are not our fault," he said.

Selva said they had been dealing with low water pressure and incidence of burst pipes on a regular basis for more than 10 years.

"Developers of new commercial and other projects tap into the existing ageing pipe network but install high pressure pumps to ensure supply for their projects.

"This deprives residents at older housing areas of sufficient water supply. These developers should also be asked to pay for the cost of replacing ageing pipes," he said.

Because disruptions happen every other day and without prior notice, Selva said residents coped by having large water tanks or storage in their homes.



Some 1.6 million people in Selangor were left without water supply after the Sungai Semenyih water treatment plant was shut down for the fourth time in two months, in the third quarter of 2016. — filepic



Bandar Puteri Puchong 11 RA chairman Alice Choo hopes there will not be a repeat of last year's water crisis.

Some 1.6 million people in Selangor were left without water supply after the Sungai Semenyih water treatment plant was shut down for the fourth time in two months, in the third quarter of 2016.

An estimated 3.9 million households and businesses in the Klang Valley experienced water supply disruption in December 2016 as a result of maintenance works at a substation.

"It was especially inconvenient when it happened during Deepavali and Christmas. Households with babies and old folks had to deal with the additional hygiene problems.

"The visits by the water tankers were also irregular as they were unable to cope with the high demand by so many neighbourhoods," said Choo, who often stayed past midnight to coordinate the water tankers' visits to various Puchong neighbourhoods.

While some neighbourhoods have taken to installing extra water tanks as a solution, she said they also have to ensure the water collected does not become a breeding ground for mosquitoes.

Businesses suffer losses with every water cut

GELATO maker Gigi Teoh said the water cuts had badly affected her boutique venture.

It has caused her kitchen to suffer from production downtime, especially when the disruption happened without prior notice and during peak hours.

As a result, she had to invest RM50,000 for additional machinery.

During the water rationing period last December, Teoh had to get her workers to start work earlier so they could complete orders in time for the festive season.

But at one point, she nearly lost a large order of some 60 to 80 litres of gelato. This could translate to a drop of 10% in her profit margins.

At the height of the water crisis in 2014, hair and image consultant Michael Poh recalled having to wash his customers' hair with bottled mineral water instead.

Poh's customers saw it as a novelty but the move took away up to 5% of his profits.

That's higher than the interest rate of a fixed deposit account, observed Poh, who has witnessed many bouts of water disruptions at his five salons located in Kuala Lumpur and Petaling Jaya.

Every time water supply is disrupted, Poh



When there are water cuts, Poh can lose up to RM10,000 worth of business a day.

loses customers. A colour, cut and treatment can easily bring in anywhere between RM500 to RM1,000 plus per customer but without water supply, a salon cannot deliver.

When there are water cuts, Poh can lose up to RM5,000 to RM10,000 per day.

"In this advanced age in the city, it is embarrassing that we are still having problems with water supply," said Poh, who hoped the authorities would get their act together

soon for everybody's sake.

But herein lies a crucial question: Are businesses willing to pay higher water tariffs if water supply disruption becomes a thing of the past?

"No, unless authorities can guarantee zero water cuts," said Teoh.

"With the rising cost of living, this additional cost is going to burden the people," said Poh.

During the 2014 water rationing, Top Glove, a rubber glove manufacturer, reported millions in unnecessary losses arising from having to buy water and pay for extra transportation costs to ensure production would not be delayed.

It was said that some of the company's 18 factories in Selangor were affected by water rationing.

At that time, its founder (and FMM president) Lim said the company's water bill was RM1.2ml a month. But due to the water cut, access to this resource cost the company 10 times more than their usual bill.

Lim also recalled seeing raised eyebrows when he had to explain delivery delays to customers. They were surprised to learn that a tropical country with abundant rainfall can have water shortage.

The uncertainty of water supply also forced the company to commission a water purification system which recycles water from a nearby river as a backup plan.

But Lim revealed that the RM6.5ml project was only a supplementary measure, not a substitute for water supply.

"We are fortunate to have no natural disasters but we have man-made disasters like this water issue to deal with," he said.

Naturally, Lim is anxious for any possible future disruptions.

"We are gravely concerned especially in view of the current dry spell.

"Without steady water supply, we will not be able to fulfil our orders and may lose our customers in the long run," he said.

On the question if the company would be willing to pay higher tariffs, Lim suggested rather than increasing tariffs, the authorities should be looking at addressing losses arising from wastage from NRW, improving efficiency and saving money from there.

He also hinted that the inefficiency in managing water as an important resource had become too blatant and the authorities would have to gain the public's trust before imposing any form of charges.

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