2 April 2020

KLK FULLY SUPPORTS APPEAL BY MPOA AND MEOA TO SABAH STATE GOVERNMENT TO RESUME CRITICAL OPERATIONS IN PLANTATION

The Sabah State Government had on 30 March 2020 extended the closure of palm oil operations to three (3) additional districts in the State, resulting in a shutdown of a total of six (6) districts in Sabah which account for approximately 75% of the state’s crude palm oil (“CPO”). The Malaysian Palm Oil Association (“MPOA”) and the Malaysian Estate Owners Association (“MEOA”) had subsequently jointly submitted an appeal and stated their concerns arising from such closure. KLK fully supports this appeal and hopes that the State Government will give due consideration to the concerns raised over its shutdown directive.

KLK understands and shares the objective of the State Government to introduce measures to curb the spread of COVID-19 in Sabah. However, KLK believes that most Plantation companies have already put in place robust Standard Operating Procedures (“SOPs”) coupled with various other preventive measures following the Movement Control Order (“MCO”) on 18 March 2020. The Ministry of Plantation Industries and Commodities had also given its approval for the palm oil industry to resume operations as the National Security Council (“NSC”) had concurred that it is as an essential service.

We urge the State Government to allow the palm oil industry to resume operations and take into consideration that the palm oil industry operates in an open environment with workers employed in large fields where physical distancing can be enforced and is a norm. In addition, an estate management has full control over its premises which could further assist the State Government in enforcing the MCO. The various precautionary measures implemented by KLK to curb the spread of COVID-19 include but are not limited to the following:

(a) Restricting visitors into the plantation unless for official business and conducting body temperature checks;
(b) Daily health and body temperature monitoring and provision of personal protective equipment (“PPE”) such as masks, soaps and hand sanitisers;
(c) Disinfection of common areas in the plantation;
(d) Educate all workers on preventive measures with posters and videos on handwashing technique, social distancing and emergency contacts are made available in various languages;
(e) Medical facilities such as clinics manned by medical assistants;
(f) SOPs to regulate and check on compliance with MCO regulations;
(g) SOPs for suspected COVID-19 cases or close contact – voluntary self-isolation/quarantine centre, send for COVID-19 testing if showing symptoms and disinfection exercise to mitigate the risk of COVID-19; and
(h) SOPs for confirmed cases and voluntary lockdowns.

As such, we appeal to the State Government to reconsider its decision to shutdown the essential operations of the palm oil industry. Even within this short period of recent closure, it can be noticed that workers are getting restless. If they were to remain idle for a prolonged period of time, they may start to congregate to overcome their boredom and ignore the practices of social distancing. It would also be more difficult to convince them to stay if they, as basic salary earners, leave to seek for better opportunities during the closure of operations. This could potentially create a sea of drifting unemployed workers that could defeat the whole purpose of the MCO and expose the wider community to a higher risk of COVID-19 infection.
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