

## **Authorities mull measures over occupied conservation forest**

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Leading authorities of Vientiane province are considering options to deal with occupiers, who have planted industrial trees in the province's conservation forest, a senior provincial official has said.

Some 300 hectares of conservation forest have been occupied and planted with eucalypt trees grown by local villagers in partnership with Burapha Agro-Forestry Company Limited, which is seeking a large area of land for tree planting.

Head of the province's Forest Resource Management Division Ounheuan Keophomma said the proposed measures have been submitted to the province's leading committee for deliberation.

The occupied 300 hectares were not in critical locations within the conservation forest area and have been used by villagers for their shifting cultivation for years, meaning the forest there was already damaged.

This occupied forest area has been planted with the eucalypts since last year.

“In our proposed solution, we recommended that there could be conversion [of this damaged forest area] into other uses,” he told *Vientiane Times* meaning the conversion would enable production activities to be carried on.

“We are still waiting for guidance from the leading committee.”

In critical areas where forest is conserved for protecting nature, plant species, animals and ecology, the conservation forest is strictly prohibited from being converted, he said.

According to Article 70 of the Law on Forestry, converting conservation forest areas for other purposes can be done in necessary cases when the area is needed for other uses and it will bring greater benefit to the country and people. The conversion can only be done in an area that has been allocated.

The law permits two kinds of conversion – temporary conversion and permanent conversion.

Temporary conversion applies for shorter production activities such as mining projects and after the activities are phased out, the area must be reconverted back into forest, while trees must be replanted by those carrying out the activities.

Permanent conversion applies to long term projects such as infrastructure development including road construction.

Burapha Agro-Forestry Company, which produces wooden furniture, has encouraged local villagers to plant eucalypts for the company since 1993.

Villagers who devoted their land for a 30-year contract to plant eucalypts for the company will be paid between two to three million kip per hectare, according to the company's Deputy Managing director Ms Souphayvanh Thiengchanxay.

The villagers have also been given additional payment for planting the eucalypt seedlings, fertilising the trees and other maintenance activities including removing weeds that grow in the plantation.

“Villagers can also continue to carry out agricultural activities on their lands as normal,” she told local media recently.

Ms Souphayvanh added that each row of eucalypt seedlings was planted nine metres apart, which gave enough space for local villagers to grow cash crops such as rice, cassava and sweet corn.

Mr Ounheuan admitted that authorities including the National Leading Committee for Rural Development and Poverty Eradication and the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry have recognised the initiative is a good practice which has improved local livelihoods.

But he said the practice, in which the company contracts local people to plant the trees on state land, notably on conservation forest, contravenes relevant laws.

“It is a good initiative, but there should be assurance that the trees are planted on lands in which land use rights have been granted to the people. Not planting on state lands,” he said.

Investors need to gain concessions from the government before they can carry out any activities on state lands, he added. Regarding the company's proposal that sought permission from the provincial authorities to carry out eucalypt planting on more than 4,000 hectares in partnership with local people, Mr Ounheuan said 2,157 hectares out of the proposed area were conservation forest that must not be given.

In addition, provincial authorities warned the Burapha Agro-Forestry Company that its actions, which took over a land concession of 100 hectares the province previously granted to a local construction company without informing the authorities, contravened the law.

The Burapha Agro-Forestry Company, which already planted eucalypts on the 100 hectares, was asked to work through the documentation to transfer the concession.

Ms Souphayvanh told local media that her company is in the process of working through the documents and they are also liaising with relevant authorities to fix all the aforementioned issues.