

# PLAN FOR CANAL BARRIERS TO STOP ENCROACHMENT ON FORESTS DROPPED

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THE NATION

The Royal Forest Department has backed off from a proposal to form a ring of canals around each forest reserve as a means of preventing encroachment, following criticism from the media and villagers.

Many questions had been raised after the idea was made public, director-general Suwit Rattanamanee said yesterday.

"I explained that it was a simple solution to prevent encroachment, [whether encroachment is] through plantation by villagers or other means of illegal acquisition. But there will be no problem, as the feedback shows that society has not yet accepted the idea, besides which there is no budget available to fund the proposal," he said.

Suwit floated another possible solution to the problem, namely hiring prospective encroachers to guard against further inroads in exchange for small plots for individual farming and plantation, and a small annual wage.

"I have spoken to villagers and they said they could go along with such an idea. We may seek funding through sponsorship from large businesses in the form of their corporate social responsibility schemes," he added.

MP Naris Khamnurak, deputy head of the House committee on natural resources and the environment, said the canal-network barrier idea was a viable solution, but it could not be adopted in all types of forest due to their differing landscapes.

He said the House panel would rather support the building of similar barriers surrounding wildlife reserves, while villagers' use of forest reserves should not be strictly restricted, as they should be allowed to exploit them moderately and lawfully, such as letting their cattle graze in such areas.

Somphot Srikosamart, a Mahidol University lecturer, said he supported the use of friendly local communities as barriers, while as a secondary option he saw benefit in turning prospective encroachers into protectors – an idea proposed long ago by late environmental activist Sueb Nakkasathien.

He said Sueb's idea was based on trust and a good relationship between authorities and the local public, and could be further developed into other types of cooperation. "Paying villagers to dig canals could create only a short-term relationship, and would not really elicit their willing and substantial participation," he added.