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Illegal farmers, a growing menace

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**R**AUB in Pahang is famous for its durians. People in faraway places such as China know Raub durians by their taste. Sadly, Raub has its infamy, too. Some of the durians that were exported may have been farmed illegally on state land sans payments to the state and federal authorities. We are told by Pahang officials that land grabs there are a decades-old story. On Friday, this newspaper reported the encroachment involved a staggering 10,521 hectares. Think 14,700 football fields. That is one great durian robbery. But Raub isn't the only area in Pahang that has shocked Sultan of Pahang Al-Sultan Abdullah Ri'ayatuddin Al-Mustafa Billah Shah. Cameron Highlands is suffering a similar fate. During a recent aerial inspection, Al-Sultan Abdullah noticed the once-lush forests of the Bertam Valley being replaced by rows of plastic-covered vegetable beds. Shockingly, indiscriminate clearance of hills isn't only a Pahang lament, but of all states. Just take a north-south drive and one will notice hills being reduced to molehills of vegetable beds and fruit trees, many being farmed illegally by locals and foreigners. Our 6,000 vegetable farmers who are farming legally are up in arms.

**The authorities need to act before it is too late.**

Rightly so. Perak, finding illegal farming on state land rampant, offered to legalise the farms. This is like rewarding land theft. Besides, others would do the same hoping to be rewarded. Illegal occupation must be treated as such.

Granted, illegal farming, especially vegetable farming, isn't a new thing. Every state appears to have had its fair share of illegal farmers. But in the last five years, especially illegal vegetable farming, has become unmanageable. Cameron Highlands is a good example of where illegal farming has gone wildly wrong. Enforcement is lame. Being encouraged by it, the foreigners have gone on an indiscriminate clearance spree. They either rent the farms from rent-seeking farmers or just encroach on state land. Their business model is the farm-to-fork kind; they grow and sell to consumers directly. But their produce is dangerous to consume given the fact that the illegal farms more than exceed safe pesticide usage to give the vegetables the appearance of freshness. With chemical runoff flowing directly into waterways, the highlands' rivers are in a bad state. If Cameron Highlands was once known for its cool climate, today it is as hot as the foothills and beyond. No one would dare call it a hill resort now. Thousands of hectares of forest have been cleared, much of what remained of the forest had been dumped into the rivers. When monsoon seasons come, floods and landslides disrupt the highlanders' lives. This is not what they bargained for when they settled there. The authorities need to act before it is too late.

Johor, Perak and other states where illegal farming is rampant must not repeat Cameron Highlands' mistake. It is not only the foreigners they are dealing with, but also locals. Consider the farming under Tenaga Nasional Berhad's electricity transmission line corridors. TNB allows such farming, but how many have sought its approval? Some may have approvals but only for the corridors. Yet farmers who grow vegetables or cash crops are encroaching into adjacent forests. Not another Cameron Highlands, please.