

PMOVE

Govt puts off legal action against forest dwellers

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The Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment has agreed to delay legal action against people living in disputed forest areas.

The government reached an agreement with the People's Movement for a Just Society (Pmove) last week to allow farmers to continue working the land temporarily.

The ministry would not take any legal action against locals who could prove they had lived in the forest before the forest zones were established, Environment Minister Preecha Rengsomboonsuk said yesterday.

The process to verify land rights would be based on the ministry's satellite map with a scale of 1:4,000. The map would prove which locals had lived in the disputed area before the announcement of a forest zone, and which ones encroached afterward, he said.

"We will use the map to prove the locals' right to the land," he said.

"If there is no further forest encroachment, we will let them stay where they are until we reach a clear resolution over disputed forest land."

He said immediate legal action would be taken against those who further encroach on forest which is clearly off-limits.

Mr Preecha said his ministry has been working with the Ministry of Agriculture

and Cooperatives and the Interior Ministry to define agricultural zones in the forest and to deal with encroachment problems.

The ministry's decision came after Pmove, a network of grassroots activists, reached an agreement with the government last week after holding a week-long rally in front of Government House. The government agreed in principle to issue community title deeds in some of the disputed areas.

The agreement permits the farmers to temporarily work the land pending the creation of an office to manage a land bank and verify land rights.

Legal action against the residents would be suspended during the process.

The ministry said there are 25 communities in forest zones which have applied for community title deeds.

However, only five communities initially qualify to receive the land rights document — three in Chiang Mai, one in Nan and one in Ubon Ratchathani.

Pmove's South coordinator, Boon sae Jung, said the use of a satellite images alone is not a perfect tool to identify the locals' land rights.

The government should understand that residents in the South often plant trees for agricultural use among other trees in the forest, he said.

The new trees merge with the forest and that should not be considered as encroachment.