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This area is not fit for animals

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Contractor to pay Acres damages for shelter project gone awry; faces pollution charges too

AN ANIMAL rights group paid some \$500,000 to a contractor to level up a plot of land in Choa Chu Kang and build an animal shelter on it.

What the Animal Concerns Research and Education Society (Acres) got instead stank to high heaven when the contractor filled the land with woodchips that rotted and contaminated the soil and discharged brackish water.

Now, not only has ANA Contractor been ordered by the High Court to pay damages to Acres, but it also faces charges of polluting the Kranji Reservoir, brought against it by the National Environment Agency (NEA).

The area, which comprises two-thirds of the Acres site, is unusable.

Speaking to The Straits Times yesterday, Acres director Louis Ng said he was “disappointed and devastated” when he realized what had happened shortly after the structures were completed in 2007.

He said: “We were nearing the final step of opening the shelter and then we had to take 10 steps back.”

In September 2006, Acres engaged ANA to build the shelter on a plot of land measuring about 200m by 100m – about the size of two football fields – that it had leased from the state for six years.

As the land was on a slope, soil had to be brought in to level it first.

The contractor brought in subcontractor, Lok Sheng Enterprises, for the purpose, but shortly after the land was filled, the area was plagued by a foul stench and brackish water started to seep through the surface.

This drew the attention of the NEA, which discovered that the land had been filled with decomposing woodchips that polluted the groundwater. The discharge polluted the Kranji Reservoir and its environment.

Acres, through lawyers S.Suresh and M.Rajaram from Allen and Gledhill, took the case to the High Court when the project had to be delayed.

Justice Kan Ting Chiu held ANA liable for the delay in judgment released on Monday and ordered it to pay damages.

Professor Wang Jing Yuan, a specialist in solid waste resource management from the School of Civil and Environmental Engineering in Nanyang Technological University, told the court that the soil used had been unsuitable for leveling the land.

It is understood that if clean woodchips such as those from trees, as opposed to contaminated woodchips from furniture, with its additives, had been used, it would have made a difference.

Justice Kan ordered a separate hearing before the Registrar to assess the amount of damages ANA should pay Acres. ANA is defended by lawyer Leong Kwok Weng.

Mr Ng told The Straits Times that the shelter was to have housed 400 wild animals like star tortoises and primates rescued from the illegal wildlife trade or found injured.

They would be quarantined there for a spell then released here or overseas.

He said the project would resume in about nine months, starting with the land being cleared.

An NEA spokesman said yesterday that ANA faces 33 charges under the Environmental Public Health Act. Anyone found guilty could be fined up to \$10,000 or jailed up to 12 months or both.

ANA also faces another charge of failing to comply with a notice to remove and clean up the woodchips at the site, which can draw a fine of up to \$50,000.