

Business interests blamed for forest moratorium delay

The delay of a scheduled moratorium on forest conversion that was supposed to be enforced at the beginning of the year is the result of lobbying by businesses operating in the country's forests, an official says. Head of the presidential taskforce on reducing emissions from deforestation and forest degradation (REDD plus) Kuntoro Mungkusubroto said that the lobbyists included people from mining companies and oil palm plantations who were seeking to protect their own interests.

"Our move [on the forest moratorium] has been sharply observed by lobbyists such as mining companies and oil palm plantations," Kuntoro said as quoted by Antara news agency on Tuesday. The Norway government pledged to provide US\$1 billion to Indonesia on the condition that Indonesia could halt deforestation of natural forests and peatlands. A stipulation of that agreement required Indonesia to outlaw forest clearing for two years starting on the first of this month.

An estimated 1 million hectares of forest are destroyed every year in Indonesia. This massive deforestation rate is in large part caused by expansions of oil palm plantations and mining firms. The government earlier said technical issues had prevented it from imposing the moratorium, including conflicting definitions of what a forest is.

A number of business people from oil palm plantations and mining firms have expressed concern that the moratorium on natural forests and peat would hamper the expansion of their businesses. They argued that the government's pledge to allow them to expand their businesses on to idle forest would not resolve the issue, as there was no concrete legal definition for the term idle forest.

The government has said that it will allocate 40 million hectares of land as idle forest land, which industries could expand onto. The REDD taskforce said that it had received some proposals for the implementation of the forest moratorium. But Kuntoro insisted that he would reject any proposal that demanded the government include in its definition of idle forest any area with harvesting trees, with the stipulation that such trees could be replanted elsewhere to make way for conversion projects.

"Once a forest stands, it should remain standing," he said.

The Forestry Ministry said that about 2 million hectares of forest had been converted illegally by oil palm and mining businesses. Environment Minister Gusti Muhammad Hatta said the debate on the forest moratorium was currently centered on whether business activities would still be allowed to convert secondary forests, or areas that had been converted for business purposes.

"It is clear that primary forests and peat will be protected. The talks are now centering on the status of secondary forests," he said on Tuesday.

Greenomics Indonesia has said the government must be serious in following up on its promises to stop the conversion of forests. Greenomics reported that the conversion of natural forests had increased by 100 percent last year from 2009, and that the volume of wood removed from natural forests rose to 12.18 million cubic meters in 2010.

"The increase of the conversion of natural forests shows there have been no changes in forest protection since President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono made his speech at the Copenhagen climate summit in 2009 and the letter of intent (LoI) with Norway," Greenomics' National Coordinator Vanda Mutia Dewi said.