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Rivers get murkier as more polluters set in

Worsening environmental conditions and a clean water crisis loom as palm oil plantations and mining companies are predicted to increase dumping untreated waste onto rivers, an environmental NGO says. The Indonesian Environmental Forum (Walhi) predicted that pollution and environmental damage would increase 50 to 70 percent this year from the 75 recorded incidents of pollution last year.

In its 2011 environmental outlook presented on Wednesday, Walhi said it found that coal and gold mining companies deposited waste into rivers 25 times last year, while palm oil plantations dumped waste 22 times.

“The number could increase 50 percent to 70 percent this year,” Mukri Friatna, head campaigner of Walhi, said on Wednesday. Walhi said that the waste from palm oil plantations had polluted Aek Sipongi Pining River in North Sumatra, the Kerinci River in Riau and Bamban River in Central Kalimantan, among others. Waste from coal mining polluted rivers as well, including Batang Hari River in Jambi, Enim River in South Sumatra and Kuranji River in East Kalimantan.

“The main pollutants from extractive industries and oil palm plantations would remain. In addition, waste from hospitals worsens river water quality as well,” he said. Apart from the extractive-based activities, hospitals are also another serious threat to rivers. Mukri said that many hospitals, including those in Jakarta, had set up waste treatment facilities but remained ineffective due to poor law enforcement. The 2008 Law on Waste Management carries a sentence of up to three years’ imprisonment and a Rp 100 million fine for those who fail to manage hazardous waste.

The 2009 Environmental Law also stipulates the minimum sanctions for polluters, but none of the government regulations needed to implement the two laws have been issued yet. The Environment Ministry planned to start ranking green hospitals based on medical waste treatment from fear that some hospitals have dumped untreated and potentially hazardous medical waste into rivers.

The first ranking of 30 hospitals will be announced later this year. Hospitals are required to have waste treatment plants and to have environmental impact analysis documents (Amdal) in order to obtain an operating license. Executive director of the Indonesian Center for Environmental Law (ICEL) Rhino Subagyo renewed criticisms of the Environment Ministry for failing to issue the government regulations needed to implement Environmental Law.

“If there are still no government regulations this year, the powerful Environmental Law could not be implemented,” he said.

The environmental outlook of Walhi predicted that conflicts and human rights violations related to tenure rights problems would also increase this year. Walhi recorded some 79 incidents of tenure conflicts that left three people dead last year. It said land tenure conflicts would increase most in 11 provinces, including Riau, South Sumatra, Central Kalimantan, East Kalimantan, Papua and Central Sulawesi.

Deputy head of the National Commission on Human Rights, Nur Kholis said that human rights violations related to natural resource conflicts would be difficult to resolve since the government tended to be more supportive of big companies than local people. Walhi recorded some 79 incidents of tenure conflicts that left three people dead last year.