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SBY to sign moratorium this month

President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono is slated to sign a presidential instruction this month, serving as the country's legal basis to stop the handing out of licenses to convert primary forest and peatland for business purposes.

The signing will take place two months after the pledged deadline on Jan. 1. However, the two-year moratorium will exclude secondary forest — forest that has already been converted for other purposes.

Presidential special staff on climate change Agus Purnomo said that a team of officials drafting the instruction had reached a deal on key points of the moratorium.

“It is now a matter of wording [the draft]; the message is clear, the moratorium is in place to protect existing forests still in good condition,” he said after meeting with Yudhoyono on Friday.

There are two different drafts of the moratorium. The first draft was handed over by the head of the taskforce on reducing emissions from deforestation and forest degradation (REDD+), Kuntoro Mangkusubroto, to Yudhoyono on Jan. 17.

In the draft, 12 institutions are given detailed work to effectively protect the forests to implement REDD+ to avert the deforestation rate. It also said that the head of the REDD+ agency would report the implementation directly to Yudhoyono.

The second draft was submitted by the Forestry Ministry through Coordinating Minister for the Economy Hatta Rajasa. The draft said licenses would stop only on primary forests and peatland areas covering some 60 million hectares of forest in the country. It was signed by Forestry Minister Zulkifli Hasan, Environment Minister Gusti Muhammad Hatta, head of National Land Agency Joko Winoto and Hatta.

Agus said that to improve existing forest problems, a presidential instruction could not be the only initiative to rely on. “We need another mechanism to deal with other issues in forest protection; such as for forest management in secondary areas,” he said. “We protect good forests with the moratorium policy and rehabilitate the already damaged forest with other mechanisms.”

Activists have criticized the government for its poor forest management that has caused the loss of more than 1 million hectares of forests per year — the highest deforestation rate on the planet.

Teguh Surya of the Indonesian Environmental Forum (Walhi) said the moratorium should be used to improve forest management in the country.

Walhi, Greenpeace and Sawit Watch have repeatedly warned that the moratorium only on primary forests and peatland would be meaningless to improve Indonesia's forest since that area had been protected under the forestry law.

Greenpeace predicted the moratorium would only preserve some 41 million hectares of the already protected forests.