

Forest fires hit Jambi, N. Sumatra and Riau

Forest fires have ravaged North Sumatra, Jambi and Riau — three of the eight provinces most vulnerable to forest fires — in the last three days with fires spreading to peatland areas in Jambi on Saturday, officials said.

Gusti Nuspanyah, an aide to the environment minister, said the fires had not impacted on economic activities in the three provinces.

“We detected hotspots in the three provinces including the burning of peatland areas in Jambi,” he told The Jakarta Post on Saturday. There is no immediate data on the number of fires as of Saturday.

Fires in peatlands are difficult to contain because the blazes are located beneath the topsoil.

The fires come on the heels of an ASEAN environment ministers’ meeting on the potential threat of haze at a two-day summit in Singapore. The meeting ended Thursday.

Singapore’s weather agency forecast the rainy season to continue until the end of March.

“Given that prediction, the potential of forest fires escalating would be small, at least until March,” Purwasto Sapoprayagi, the head of the Environment Ministry’s forest fire division, told the Post on Saturday. Purwasto attended the Singapore meeting.

The dry season is expected in April, increasing the threat of forest fires.

“However, we have improved our coordination with the 10 most vulnerable provinces. We have also set up community centers in preparation,” Purwasto said.

The provinces most prone to forest fires include North Sumatra, Riau, Jambi, South Sumatra and all provinces in Kalimantan. Indonesia has for years been dealing with the protracted issue of forest fires, especially in the dry season, with thick haze often blanketing neighboring Singapore and parts of Malaysia.

The Singaporean and Malaysian governments last October issued letters to Indonesian authorities protesting the thick haze from forest fires.

The Dumai, Riau, environmental agency stated that thick smoke had reduced visibility to less than 1 kilometer Friday.

Agency head Basri told Antara news agency that the thick smoke irritated the eyes. The Riau weather agency said it had recorded 80 hotspots across Sumatra as of Wednesday.

“The 80 hotspots are spread across Riau, North Sumatra, South Sumatra and Jambi,” Riau Geophysics, Climatology and Meteorology (BMKG) head Marzuki said.

In Riau itself, the agency said, there were 39 hotspots located in all regencies.

The Environment Ministry called on local councilors in vulnerable provinces to deliberate bylaws prohibiting the burning of forests. Only three provinces — Central Kalimantan, West Kalimantan and Riau — have bylaws banning people from starting fires in forests.