

## Illegal logging in Musi Banyuasin rampant

Illegal logging in the Merang production forest in Musi Banyuasin, South Sumatra, is becoming increasingly common despite the local administration's temporary freeze on sawmill operations. Seven sawmill operators in the forest are apparently unperturbed by the South Sumatra forestry office's temporary ban following the issuance of Forestry Ministry Decree No. 522.504 on the freeze, Anwar Sadat, executive director of the South Sumatra office of the Indonesian Forum for the Environment (Walhi), said on Thursday.

Despite the decree, tree felling is getting out of hand, with thousands of cubic meters of meranti timber being illegally taken away, he said.

"Our findings in the field prove this, meaning that illegal logging is still going on. Wood processing activities are getting busier," Sadat said.

According to Sadat, this is contrary to comments made by officials of the local administration and by the police.

He explained that the results of monitoring by a number of non-governmental organizations like Walhi South Sumatra, the Spora Foundation, the United Green Indonesia South Sumatra, Wahana Bumi Hijau, the Consortium of Sustainable Natural Resources Management and the Kuala Merdeka Foundation, showed that at least seven sawmills had continued to operate even though the local forestry agency had ordered them to cease operations as of mid December.

"The problem is the officials and the police insist on claiming otherwise," he said.

Worse still, Sadat said, there was a new modus operandi in which illegal loggers told members of the public that the illegally obtained logs were evidence confiscated by the local police. As widely reported, soon after a recent inspection by South Sumatra Governor Alex Noerdin and members of the integrated team, the police confiscated illegally felled logs.

"However, due to the limited availability of funds to transport the confiscated logs, they were temporarily stored at the local forestry office, thereby making the status of the evidence unclear – whether it would be auctioned off or something else," he said.

It is feared that the unclear situation will be exploited by sawmill operators to procure logs from other suppliers for the operation of their sawmills, he added. Adio Sayfri of Wahana Bumi Hijau Foundation said the weak supervision on the part of the authorities concerning illegal logging was apparently linked to backroom deals.

"It's now time for the governor to directly lead the fight against illegal logging," he said, hoping the forest concessionaire would also take a tougher stance toward illegal loggers because the illegally felled logs mostly came from the forest in the conservation area that is in the concessionaire's jurisdiction.

Adio also asked the governor to form a special team in charge of eradicating illegal logging by involving the community and NGOs dealing in the environment.

Such a team is sorely needed because there has been no significant change following the recent visit by the governor and his team to the site, he added.