

967 forestry firms under govt scrutiny

A joint government team is planning stricter law enforcement against hundreds of plantation and mining firms operating illegally in Central Kalimantan, home to avoided deforestation pilot project. The team will consist of officials from the Anti Judicial Mafia Taskforce, Forestry Ministry, Attorney General's Office (AGO), National Police and Corruption Eradication Commission (KPK). Data from the team showed that, from a total of 967 plantation and mining firms in the province, only 76 companies secured permits to convert the forest into business endeavors.

From 325 plantation companies with a total area of 4.6 million hectares, only 67 obtained permits from the Forestry Ministry. In the mining sector, of 615 registered companies in the province, only nine hold permits to convert forests in an area of 30,000 hectares. Mining companies, mostly small-scale coal mining companies, operated in area of 3.7 million hectares. The Forestry Ministry estimated the companies illegally converting forest in Central Kalimantan incurred a state loss of Rp 158 trillion (US\$17.54 billion).

"We will cooperate with the police, AGO and KPK to enforce the law against violators in Central Kalimantan," chairman of the Presidential Judicial Mafia Taskforce Kuntoro Mangkusubroto said on Tuesday.

Taskforce members Mas Achmad Santosa, Yunus Husein, Denny Indrayana and Forestry Minister Zulkifli Hasan attended the press conference. Kuntoro said the Forestry Minister had been committed to a permit moratorium in Central Kalimantan until all existing problems could be resolved. Minister Zulkifli would take the lead to resolve legal framework including the licensing process, forest definition and evaluating the monitoring and law enforcement by the local administration.

The 1999 Forestry Law stipulates that permits to use forests for business purposes should be issued by the Forestry Ministry in Jakarta. Because of regional autonomy, local administrations are given authority to issue permits for small-scale companies but they still need to obtain permits from Jakarta. Zulkifli said massive forest conversion, including in Central Kalimantan, occurred following many local administrations' failures secure permits from Jakarta.

President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono has named Central Kalimantan province as the site of a pilot project to implement a letter of intent on climate change in partnership with the Norwegian government. With the pilot project, the Central Kalimantan administration is required to stop issuing new permits for forestry businesses.

Activists have repeatedly criticized the government for poor law enforcement of massive land-clearing and forest conversion, including in Central Kalimantan.

Minister Zulkifli and Environment Minister Gusti Muhammad Hatta visited the area and found illegal activities in the province but have taken no action yet.

Taskforce member Mas Achmad said withdrawing permits of the wayward companies would be one of the penalties imposed on the violators.

"Withdrawing permits will be one of administrative sanctions. It is very likely, as it has been stipulated under the law," he said.