

Forest law failings could speed up climate change

Climate change experts have said that stronger law enforcement was needed to prevent future disastrous wildfires in susceptible areas such as the peatlands of Riau, Sumatra. Data from the World Resource Institute (WRI) shows that in Riau there were around 3,101 high confidence fire alerts from Feb. 20 to March 11, 2014. As a comparison, the province saw 2,643 fire alerts from June 13 to June 30 last year. From March 2013 to March 2014, 52 percent of all fire alerts in Indonesia came from four regencies in Riau province.

Over the last year, haze generated from fires in Riau has caused respiratory problems for more than 58,000 people. The WRI data also shows that in 2009 greenhouse gases (GHG) from forest and peatland fires in Riau contributed to 27 percent of all the GHGs emitted from Indonesia that year. GHGs stay in the atmosphere for tens to hundreds of years after being released and are considered a major driver of climate change.

Several laws are on the books that seek to protect Indonesian forests and peatlands from deforestation and degradation. The most recent is Presidential Instruction No. 6/2013, which suspends the granting of new licenses for the exploitation of primary forest and peatlands in protected areas. The law will expire in May 2015.

Indonesia ratified the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) on Nov. 23, 1994.

Andika Putraditama of the forest and landscape restoration department at WRI, told The Jakarta Post that although the government had attempted to curb wildfires by releasing regulations year after year, weak implementation on the ground had hindered fire prevention.

“When we questioned forestry agency officials in Riau for our research, many did not understand what the regulations entailed and how to enforce them in case of violations. Some did not even know where the protected areas were located,” he said at the Agency for the Assessment and Application of Technology (BPPT) in Jakarta, on Tuesday.

Andika went on to say the weak implementation was also caused by multiple ministries being responsible for upholding forest and peatland protection laws. He said responsibility was divided between the Forestry Ministry and the Environment Ministry, causing confusion between who had the most authority over such cases.

Deputy environment minister for law enforcement Sudariyono said that the Environment Ministry had been actively investigating suspected perpetrators of forest and peatland fires.

Currently, 46 companies have been investigated by the ministry for the spate of fires set during February and March 2014. So far, four of those companies have been found innocent of wrongdoing, and 42 remain under investigation.

Sudariyono acknowledged that one of the challenges to forest and peatland protection was translating scientific evidence into effective laws.

To help surmount this challenge, Andika said data from both industry and the government must be made accessible for everyone. “We must shift their perception that the data will be used against them. It will encourage transparency so that the public can understand what is really happening on the ground and we can use the data to protect our forests fully,” he said.

Dadang Hilman of the Indonesia Climate Change Center (ICCC) said that another solution was to launch a satellite that could generate a map of Indonesia that accurately portrayed company land boundaries. This would make it easier for the government to pinpoint which company to investigate in future forest and peatland fire cases.(fss)