

Riau forms task force to tackle haze-causing fires

The Riau provincial administration has formed a forest and peatland fire mitigation task force to cope with the haze blanketing the province for the past month. "Response remains sluggish and it must be accelerated in an organized manner," Riau Governor Annas Maamun said on Friday.

According to him, the task force had prepared two mitigation plans, namely aerial and land firefighting. Aerial firefighting will be carried out through water bombing via helicopters or planes. "The task force will continue coordinating with the Meteorology, Climatology and Geophysics Agency [BMKG] to design an artificial rain program by using weather modification technology," said Annas.

Land firefighting, on the other hand, will be carried out by a firefighting team consisting of members from the Riau Disaster Mitigation Agency (BPBD), Social Services Office, Indonesian Military (TNI) and police units. "I will immediately meet with the regents and mayors to discuss the plan that has been prepared by the task force," said Annas.

"BNPB [National Disaster Mitigation Agency] will disburse the budget only after the regencies and municipalities have set an emergency response status, hence the need for coordination with regents and mayors," he added.

Riau BPBD head Said Saqlul Amri said the task force would effectively start working on Saturday. It will be divided into three teams and assigned to seven regencies and municipalities where hotspots have been detected over the past several weeks. Besides relevant agencies in the province, private companies operating in the respective regencies and municipalities will also help put out the fires.

"Should there not be enough firefighting equipment, the governor and regents will request companies to supply more equipment so action can be taken immediately on the field," said Amri.

According to the latest observations by the Pekanbaru BMKG on Friday morning, hundreds of hotspots were still detected in seven regencies and cities across the province.

As many as 88 of them were found in Bengkalis regency, 30 on the Meranti Islands, 17 in Pelalawan, 16 in Indragiri Hilir, nine in Siak, six in Rokan Hilir and three in Dumai city.

"Today, rain fell in a number of areas in Riau, including Pekanbaru and the eastern coastal areas, but there won't be much rain. The sun will be out tomorrow so the chance of rain is small," said Pekanbaru BMKG Data Analysis Section staff member Ibnu Amiruddin.

Meanwhile, the Riau Health Office is running low on dust masks and has asked the central government for an additional supply of 100,000.

"We currently only have 3,000 dust masks," said Riau Health Agency's Environmental Health and Disease Control and Prevention Division head Erdinal.

"We will continue to ask for dust masks as long as the haze is present in Riau. The air quality in a number of regions is poor so we must be prepared for the impact on residents," added Erdinal.

One of the areas that was in need of additional masks was Dumai city, he continued. Over the past couple of days, air pollution in the port city has reached alarming levels of between 437 PSI and 503 PSI. "Yesterday we distributed 25,000 dust masks and the local health office only has a reserve of around 30,000 dust masks, far from the ideal number of 100,000 masks," said Erdinal.