

Residents warned over haze returning to Sumatra

The National Disaster Mitigation Agency (BNPB) has called on residents to prepare for the worst as forest and peatland fires intensify leading up to the peak of the dry season in two months.

BNPB spokesman Sutopo Purwo Nugroho said some parts of Riau were once again blanketed in choking haze. The affected areas include Rengat, Pelalawan, Dumai and Pekanbaru. Haze, however, has yet to severely reduce visibility in those areas.

“In Rengat, the visibility is 3 kilometers, while Dumai is at 6 kilometers and Pekanbaru is 8 kilometers. Those numbers are still normal,” Sutopo told The Jakarta Post on Saturday.

Sutopo also said the reappearance of haze in Riau was undoubtedly caused by forest and land clearing, usually done to make way for plantations. According to the Terra and Aqua satellites, as of Saturday, there were at least 250 hotspots across Riau.

Rokan Hilir recorded the highest number of hotspots, 157, followed by Bengkalis, Dumai, Rokan Hulu, Pelalawan, Kampar, Inhil, Kuansing and Siak.

“The number of hotspots has increased significantly, as of yesterday [Friday] there were only 80 hotspots detected,” Sutopo said, adding that higher temperatures had contributed to the spike. It is predicted that the number of hotspots would peak between August and October.

Instead of conducting firefighting efforts, strict law enforcement aimed at prevention would be more effective in combating haze, Sutopo said. “It is not easy to extinguish peatland fires.”

He went on to say that the forest and peatland fires that hit from February to April in Riau alone had caused Rp 20 trillion (US\$1.6 billion) in damage. As many as 2,398 hectares of biosphere reserve and 21,914 hectares of land were razed.

The haze resulting from the fires affected 6 million people, with 58,000 suffering from respiratory illnesses.

The BNPB previously disbursed Rp 134 billion and deployed 4,931 personnel to tackle the problem.

“It really takes a lot of money to handle the forest and peatland fires. Therefore, the most effective way is applying strict law enforcement,” Sutopo said.

Meanwhile, BNPB head Syamsul Maarif said that he had called on local governments, especially the Riau provincial administration, to help prevent forest and peatland fires. The haze has been a major problem for Riau and other provinces in Sumatra for years.

Last year, a diplomatic war of words ensued after the haze drifted over to Malaysia and Singapore, causing a severe health hazard for residents there. President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono eventually issued a formal apology to the two nations.