

## **Emergency status declared as haze worsens**

A number of regencies and cities in Riau have declared emergency status following worsening air quality and an increasing number of people suffering from respiratory problems due to the choking haze. Affected regions include Bengkalis, Rokan Hilir, Indragiri Hilir, Siak, Pelalawan, Meranti and Dumai.

“We will later report this situation to the central government to get assistance from the National Disaster Mitigation Board [BNPB],” said Riau Governor Annas Maamun after attending a meeting with plantation owners on Tuesday. He said that the provincial administration could make use of an emergency response budget of Rp 10 billion (US\$860,000) to handle the haze problem. “We will also assist regencies and cities to hire helicopters and planes for water bombing purposes,” he added.

Annas said that 257 plantation owners had stated their commitment to helping tackle forest fires. “They will give donations in the form of tools or cash,” he continued. As for the long-term effort, Annas said the administration will deploy five volunteers in each village to help put out fires. They will file a report with the local administration should they become unable to handle the disaster in their respective regions.

“They will be trained [for the purpose]. They will get full gear and a stipend of Rp 300,000 per month. Some companies have agreed to provide training for the volunteers,” he went on.

Annas said that there would be no excuses for offenders involved in slash and burn activities. “Arrest them and put them in jail to give a deterrent effect. The legal process should run fairly whether the offenders are businesspeople or individuals. If they are found guilty, they must be punished,” he said. Riau Police have arrested 24 suspects allegedly involved in forest fires. “So far, they are not linked to any companies,” Riau Police spokesman Adj. Sr. Comr. Guntur Aryo Tejo said.

The air quality index has reached hazardous levels in some regions across the province. In Dumai, for instance, air quality reached 773 on the pollutant standard index (PSI), while in Siak the level was almost 500. Under normal conditions, the PSI range is between zero and 50; above 300 is considered hazardous.

As of Tuesday, there were 145 hot spots detected in five of 12 regencies and cities across Riau, the Pekanbaru Meteorology, Climatology and Geophysics Agency (BMKG) reported. Meanwhile, the haze has left an estimated 22,301 residents suffering from acute respiratory infections. The highest numbers of cases were so far recorded in Bengkalis, Siak and Pelalawan.

“The number of patients with respiratory infections has been increasing significantly since January. At the end of January, there were [only] 5,000 patients. This is a very concerning situation,” Riau Health Agency head Zainal Arifin said.

The disaster has also left people in the neighboring province of West Sumatra suffering from similar health problems, as smog has also engulfed some parts of the province. Bukittingi Health Agency head Syofia Dasmauli said that there had been a 20 percent increase in new respiratory cases in the past two weeks, Antara news agency reported. The thick haze has also disrupted flights, causing financial losses for airlines as they have been forced to spend extra money on fuel and passenger services.

“We are facing huge financial losses due to the Riau haze, but we cannot reveal the figure. The losses have been caused by increased fuel expenses as flights had to be diverted. And we have had to pay extra costs to passengers who had to wait at airports [following the delays],” Lion Air Sumatra branch regional head, Mahriddo, told The Jakarta Post.

He said that, since Monday, Lion Air had either diverted or canceled all scheduled flights to Pekanbaru

in Riau. On Tuesday, it also canceled flights from Kuala Namu International Airport to Sibolga, both in North Sumatra, and from Kuala Namu to Gunung Sitoli, Nias Island, while flights linking Jakarta and Pekanbaru were temporarily diverted to Batam in Riau Islands due to low visibility.

