

Riau braces for more hotspots, Jambi to face extreme weather

Dry conditions across Riau in the past few days had created more hotspots, sharply increasing the total number from 219 on Thursday to 777 on Friday, an official said on Friday. Spokesperson of the Riau haze disaster mitigation task force, Col. Bernard Robert, said that according to the Terra and Aqua satellites, the majority of hotspots were detected in Bengkalis, followed by Rokan Hilir, Siak, Dumai, Indragiri Hilir, Pelalawan, Indragiri Hulu and Meranti Islands.

“Thin haze still covers Riau despite our efforts in fighting [forest and peatland] fires,” Bernard said, adding that the task force had spread a total of 83.5 tons of salt in clouds above the province to induce rain. “We have also called on residents to help extinguish fires and prevent them from reoccurring in their respective regions,” he added.

The Riau provincial administration, Bernard went on, had decided to extend the emergency response period to April 4. Meanwhile, as of Friday, 102 individual suspects had been arrested for allegedly setting fires to clear land and carrying out illegal logging during the emergency response period. “Six suspects are still at large,” Riau Police spokesperson Adj. Sr. Comr. Guntur Aryo Tejo said.

The charges vary and the maximum penalty is 10 years’ imprisonment and a Rp 10 billion (US\$881,000) fine. “The dossiers of 18 cases have already been completed and the suspects will stand trial in the near future,” Guntur said. Separately, Riau Health Agency head Zainal Arifin confirmed that the air quality in the province had deteriorated in the last few days, saying that the agency had prepared 110,000 masks for distribution.

Meanwhile, Jambi is facing a similar problem as it has been predicted it will experience an extreme dry season this year, which is expected to start in May and end in October, due to the weak El Niño phenomenon that is expected to hit the province. “This [the phenomenon] will cause extreme dry weather from late May until September. We need to be aware of possible forest fires during this period,” Kurnianingsih of the Jambi Meteorology, Climatology and Geophysics Agency (BMKG) said on Friday.

Jambi Disaster Mitigation Agency (BPBD) head Zubaidi AR said that his agency had discussed this issue with other agencies in anticipation of impending dry conditions. The agency, he added, had also coordinated with the National Disaster Mitigation Agency (BNPB) to prepare measures to create artificial rain, such as cloud seeding, if it was necessary.

Among the worst-hit areas, according to Zubaidi, are Muaro Jambi, West Tanjung Jabung and East Tanjung Jabung regencies as well as Jambi municipality.

“We have also coordinated with water company PDAM Tirta Matang in anticipation of a possible water shortage,” he said.

Previously, a researcher from the National Aeronautics and Space Institute (Lapan), Didi Satiadi, said data from the Satellite Disaster Early Warning System (Sadewa) had indicated a shift in the dry season, which was predicted to start after April’s transitional season.

“The dry season will start in May, and last till October,” he said. He recommended that nine fire-prone provinces be preemptively put on alert status to anticipate hotspots. The areas are Riau, Jambi, North Sumatra, South Sumatra, Aceh, Central Kalimantan, East Kalimantan, South Kalimantan and West Kalimantan.