

Forest fires hit Riau's regencies bordering with Malaysia

A lack of rainfall has caused difficulties in controlling fires that have already destroyed hundreds of hectares of forest and land in several areas of Riau province — with Meranti Islands and Bengkalis regencies, which border Malaysia, reaching alarming conditions. "Firefighters experienced difficulties extinguishing the flames as the area is dried peatland," Meranti Islands regency's Forestry Agency head M. Murod said on Sunday.

Fires have been burning since last week in the regency, and have spread to Rangsang Island and Tebingtinggi Island, destroying about 200 hectares of land belonging to residents. The flames also reached the concession area of forestry firm PT Sumatera Riang Lestari (SRL) and sago plantation PT National Sago Prima (NSP).

Hundreds of firefighters from the companies have so far not managed to control the blaze, Murod said. He admitted he could not give the exact size of the companies' land concessions that were razed by the fire. "The blaze is getting bigger and bigger inside the plantations. It's difficult to identify. I have just received a report on losses suffered by residents," he added.

He revealed the fire on Rangsang Island was being handled by a team of firefighters from PT SRL, assisted by local people, while his forestry agency and a team from PT NSP were focused on stopping the fire on Tebingtinggi Island.

"The firefighters are now working hard to control the fire. It's even more difficult as it's hot and windy now; small flames could become bigger fires," he said.

Murod hoped the central government could soon help to extinguish the fire by setting up weather modifications, or making artificial rain, to avoid haze affecting neighboring countries, which could then trigger protests. Meanwhile, at least 200 hectares of peat land have been destroyed by fire in Bantan and Bukit Batu districts, Bengkalis.

"The fire is continuing to spread to areas that can be reached by land transportation. Rain has not fallen in these areas for the past week. The fire is really difficult to control," Bengkalis Disaster and Firefighter Agency head Mohammad Jalal said.

Jalal admitted that his agency lacked enough firefighters. "The spots are spreading, so we cannot focus on just one location."

"We asked residents and non-governmental organizations to volunteer to help us stop the fires. It's difficult because the operation to extinguish the fires should be conducted around the clock," he said.

The blaze, which started last week, has already been extinguished once, but flared again due to hot weather and strong winds.

Jalal did not reject a possibility that the fire was caused by burning for land clearing. "We have often warned about avoiding fire in peatland. In the current hot weather and strong winds, the dried peatland could easily burn and it's difficult to extinguish."

Meanwhile, a thin haze continued to blanket cities including Pekanbaru and Dumai. In Tembilahan, the southernmost city in the province, visibility in the morning was reportedly 700 meters due to the haze.

The Pekanbaru Meteorology, Climatology and Geophysics Agency (BMKG) reported that the number of hot spots was fluctuating but had reached a maximum of 164. Bengkalis had the highest number of hot spots, followed by Siak and Pelalawan, Indragiri Hilir and Rokan Hilir.

Meanwhile, forest fires also occurred in Kotawaringin Timur regency, Central Kalimantan, due to decreasing rainfall and burning for land clearing.

"Maybe because it has not rained in the last couple of weeks so some residents cleared their land by burning it," Zainal, a resident, said on Sunday, as quoted by Antara.