

Forest fires cause billions of rupiah in losses

The fires sweeping across Meranti Islands regency, Riau province, which borders Malaysia, continue as of Monday, razing at least 885 hectares of forest and plantation areas. Meranti Islands Forestry Agency head Ma'mun Murod said the two districts of Rangsang and East Tebingtinggi were badly affected but Kepau Baru subdistrict in East Tebingtinggi was the worst hit. In Kepau Baru 750 hectares of sago plantations had been burned.

"Of that amount, 550 hectares belonged to the people. The rest belonged to PT Nasional Sago Prima [NSP]," Ma'mun said, Monday. He said that the provisory financial loss caused by the fire in East Tebingtinggi alone was predicted to have hit Rp 33 billion (US\$ 2.7 million). He said every hectare of sago field lost caused Rp 45 million in financial loss. In Rangsang, he added, there were seven hot spots across the five subdistricts of Gayung Kiri, Citra Damai, Tanjung Kedabu, Gemala Sari and Wonosari.

The hundreds of firefighters deployed had not yet extinguished the flames: Burning peat lands were especially difficult to extinguish.

"We have yet to calculate the financial loss in Rangsang district because most of the land was forest," Ma'mun said.

He added that the cause of the fires had not yet been confirmed. Some said it was a carelessly discarded cigarette butt. Some others said it was a fire started on the outskirts of a forest.

Ma'mun blamed weak preventive measures and a lack of dissemination by subdistrict administrations regarding the importance of not clearing garbage by burning it.

Separately, head of Bengkalis Regency Disaster Mitigation Agency Mohamad Jalal, said a number of hot spots in the region had been successfully dealt with. There are 11 more hot spots to be extinguish.

He said firefighters were currently focused on preventing the fire spreading to residential complexes in Kelebuk and Penampi subdistricts.

Separately, Riau Provincial Forestry Agency head Zulkifli Yusuf said the NOAA 18 satellite had detected hot spots in conservation areas including two each in Tesso Nilo National Park and Kerumutan Wildlife Preserve in Pelalawan; and one each in Bukit Tiga Puluh National Park in Indragiri Hulu, Giam Siak Kecil Wildlife Preserve in Bengkalis and Bukit Bungkok Nature Preserve in ampar.

"For conservation areas, both monitoring and fire fighting is in the hands of the Riau Natural Resource Conservation Agency [BKSDA]," he said.