

Stricter land certification needed in Riau

Subdistrict heads across Riau have been told to issue less registered-land certificates (SKT) to companies in an effort to increase alertness and prevent land and forest fires from reoccurring. Riau Governor Annas Maamun said that the environmental damage and haze were due to the ease in which companies could obtain SKT from subdistrict heads.

“Unfortunately, the SKT is often issued for land in protected areas,” Annas said on Friday. He was speaking in front of 1,025 subdistrict heads with regard to the handling of the haze disaster in the province. He recalled that while serving as regent of Rokan Hilir he had sent six subdistrict heads to prison for selling protected forests to plantation companies. “Subdistrict heads are supposed to protect their respective forests from illegal logging and fires that cause haze,” he went on.

During the meeting on Friday, the Riau Haze Disaster Mitigation Task Force also introduced water management techniques to prepare for the peak of the dry season in the province, which could happen as early as June or as late as August. Task force commander Brig. Gen. Prihadi Agus Irianto said that retention basins would be built in all fire-prone areas to provide a water source for extinguishing fires.

“Firefighters sometimes find it hard to find water sources to put out fires. Most of the time, when they arrive to help put out a blaze there is nothing they can do because they don’t have access to any water,” Prihadi said, adding that the basins would double as a water reservoir for plots of land over 50 hectares.

He also said that across Riau, there were at least 40 companies that should be required to have retention basins in their respective operational areas. “Once the governor’s instruction has passed into law, each company will have to build one,” Prihadi said.

In addition, Prihadi said all the companies would be required to build 2-hectare retention basins in spots bordering open access areas. “The water will be diverted from canals using pipelines,” he said.

It would also be compulsory for plots of land over two hectares to have a well, he continued. The development of five large capacity retention basins, according to Prihadi, was currently being accelerated in three regencies in anticipation of severe drought, predicted to occur in May.

Prihadi said the water management techniques were initiated by the National Disaster Mitigation Agency (BNPB) and Riau would be the first province to implement them.

“If this works successfully in Riau, it will be implemented in eight other provinces in Sumatra and Kalimantan that frequently experience forest and land fires,” Prihadi said.

In a related development, forest and land fires in West Tanjung Jabung regency, Jambi, have continued to expand and currently cover a combined area of over 51 hectares as of Friday, according to the regency’s Forestry Agency head H. Erwin.

Erwin blamed the fires on both deliberate land clearing activities and unintentional causes. To prevent the fires from expanding further, he said, his agency had prepared 25 personnel from the fire brigade with the support of local police and military personnel.

“Of the affected areas, Betara and Pengabuan districts are the most vulnerable because both are rich in peatland, which are extremely fire prone,” Erwin said, adding that his agency and the local police had yet to name any suspects in the forest and land fire cases due to lack of evidence.

“We call on people not to clear land through burning, because it’s illegal,” he added.

