

Govt eyes ownership verification of forests

The Presidential Working Unit for the Supervision and Management of Development (UKP4) and the Forestry Ministry launched a program on Wednesday that encourages people to step forward and declare their land ownership in forested areas. Data published by the Forestry Ministry said 122.2 million hectares (ha) of forested land in Indonesia belonged to the state. However, various parties who say their areas have been claimed by the state have motivated the government to take thorough inventory and improve the categorization of forested areas.

Muhammad Said, forest spatial and conversion director general at the Forestry Ministry, said that the inventory system, called the Rights Recognition and Verification Program, was initiated to accelerate the affirmation process of the state's forested areas nationwide by giving people a chance to claim their land.

Said added that the Forestry Ministry wished to determine the exact extent of the state's forests as soon as possible, however land disputes with a number of parties, including people who live in and around the forests, had hindered efforts to do so.

The ministry is targeting to verify the ownership of 66.3 million ha or 57 percent of forested areas by year's end. With the program, the ministry expects to confirm ownership of the entire 122.2 million ha in 2015.

"Our main target is to have accurate data on forested land ownership by 2015," Said told reporters on Wednesday.

He further said the verification program would give land owners legal grounds that would provide business certainty to investors as well as ensure that local or indigenous people would not be disturbed by business activities.

Giorgio Budi, a complaints and verification team member at UKP4, said the program could help settle land ownership conflicts in forested areas.

He explained that the sequence of the program would start with the ministry posting border signs along the edges of forested areas claimed by the state. Anyone who thought the designated borders infringed on their land should show documents to support their claim, he added.

He added that a team formed by the Forestry Ministry's boundary committee would then verify all the facts in the field before submitting a recommendation to the ministry.

The land verification result would be also submitted to the Geospatial Information Agency as input for the One Map Policy. The agency is currently creating a single source for a general map as a reference for land ownership nationwide.

Myrna Safitri, executive director of the Epistema Institute, said that even though the program was initiated with good intentions, it still had a long way to go to reach its aim of providing legal certainty for people in forested areas.

She said, for example, that the government should be aware of the importance of providing capable communicators to raise awareness in forested areas as many indigenous people did not speak the national language. "The indigenous groups also need access to legal aid to fight for their rights," Myrna said. (idb)