

Govt seeks to overturn Aceh's granting of forest clearing permit

The government will overturn a policy made by Aceh governor Irwandi Yusuf to grant a permit to an palm oil company to clear peat land forest in the Leuser ecosystem area, a senior official says.

Hadi Daryanto, secretary-general of the Forestry Ministry, said on Friday that the government would seek to impose sanctions on those responsible for the signing of the illegal approval for PT Kallista Alam to convert 1,605 hectares of protected peat swamp forest into palm oil plantations.

The policy breaches Presidential Instruction No.10/2011, issued in May this year, which bans new permits on the clearing of primary forests and peat lands.

The permit, which allows PT Kallista Alam to develop palm oil plantations in the protected peat swamp forest in the Tripa Peat Swamp, which is part of the Leuser ecosystem, was signed by Irwandi on Aug. 25. "It breaches the 2011 moratorium on new forest permits because [Irwandi] issued the permit after the moratorium was signed. Thus, we will impose sanctions by revoking the permit he granted," Hadi told The Jakarta Post.

He added that the Forestry Ministry had sent a letter to Home Minister Gamawan Fauzi, asking him to revoke the permit issued by the governor.

The ministry may even file a criminal complaint against PT Kallista Alam as it had already cleared protected peat swamp forest that was reserved for plantation activity well before Irwandi issued the permit.

Law No.41/1999 on forests stipulates that anyone wanting to carry out forestry activities must obtain land clearing consent issued by the Forestry Ministry. Without such permission, they can face up to 10 years in prison and/or a Rp 5 billion (US\$555,000) fine if convicted, says article 50 of the 1999 law.

Data collected by, among others, the Coalition Team for the Rehabilitation of Tripa (TKPRT), showed that PT Kallista Alam had started clearing the forest well before Irwandi signed the permit for the concession.

Referring to field work and a series of satellite images, the TKPRT said that the company started its first land clearing activity before Jan. 2010.

By Oct. 2010, much of the forest had been cleared, with drainage canals already having been dug.

"If it is proven that PT Kallista Alam has cleared the protected peat land forest without permission from the government, we will file a criminal complaint against the company," said Hadi.

The Forestry Ministry will conduct an investigation to collect legal evidence in relation to revealing whether the company had started clearing the protected forests before the governor granted the permit and without any consent from the ministry.

The 2011 presidential instruction, which prohibits the issuance of any new licenses for conversion of primary forests and peat lands, was issued following a bilateral agreement signed by the governments of Indonesia and Norway to strengthen cooperation in reducing greenhouse gas emissions from deforestation and forest degradation.

The Tripa Peat Swamp, which is part of the Leuser Ecosystem, is considered an area of outstanding, world-renowned biodiversity value by Wetlands International. In the 2008 National Spatial Plan, the Leuser ecosystem was established as a strategic national area for environmental protection.