

## As forest fires spread, concern mounts over Games showcase

Forest fires continued to spread in South Sumatra on Friday, while nearly 900 hot spots were reported in several regencies in the province. Hot spots were recorded in Ogan Komering Ilir, Muba, Banyuasin, Musirawas and Muaraenim as of Sept. 7.

South Sumatra disaster mitigation agency head Yulizar Dinoto said that the fires had been raging not only in forests but in productive areas.

"The wind has helped the haze drizzle away to Malaysia and Singapore," Yulizar said in Palembang on Friday. Hot spots were also reported in neighboring provinces Jambi and Riau, but according to Yulizar, the fires in South Sumatra were still relatively secure.

A team from the Agency for the Assessment and Application of Technology (BPPT) has been working to prevent the fires from spreading further. The Palembang office of the Meteorology, Climatology and Geophysics Agency (BMKG) said it was intensively monitoring the condition, which has caused concern that the haze could disturb Palembang's hosting of the SEA Games in November.

Governor Alex Noerdin said authorities might turn to artificial rain to dampen the haze. "Haze could create a negative image and perception among participants of the SEA Games," Alex said, adding that efforts to extinguish the fires were ongoing, and included helicopters dropping water bombs.

The SEA Games will feature athletes from 11 countries in Southeast Asia.

Haze is also reported to have reduced visibility in waters off of South Sumatra from 600 meters to between 400 and 500 meters, especially in the morning.

"We call on ship captains to be cautious and to optimize use of their navigation facilities," Palembang sea, river, lake and railway transportation sub-agency head Akbar said.

However, Akbar added, the low visibility would not disturb shipping at Pier 35 Ilir.

Haze in Palembang and Ogan Ilir regency has been disrupting road traffic, especially in the morning and afternoon, causing congestion at a number of intersections.

Referring to the haze, Taufic, a driver, said, "Normally, I need three hours to get to Tanjung Raja from Palembang. Now I need an extra hour to get there."

In OKI (Ogan Komering Ilir), local forestry agency head Alibudin reported that 46 hot spots had been located over the last five days in a number of districts in the regency. He said slash and burn crop clearing was partly to blame for the fires.

"We have prepared 450 trained personnel and local community personnel to help deal with the haze problem," he said. The OKI health agency, meanwhile, has distributed 1,000 free face masks, especially targeting motorcycle riders, to help reduce the health impacts.

In Banyuasin regency, peatland fires have burned down 15 hectares of plasma palm plantation belonging to PT Swadaya Indo Palma (SIP) in Setya Harapan village, Sungai Rengit sub-district, Pangkalan Balai, as of Wednesday. Banyuasin forestry and horticulture agency head Syuhada Aziz also blamed the fires on slash and burn tactics.

He said his office was distributing circulars informing farmers not to set fire to their crops.

"We will continue intensifying the ban in cooperation with related agencies. Tough sanctions must be handed down to violators. Otherwise, they will continue burning fields," he said.