

Govt tells mining firms to invest in reforestation while operating

The Forestry Ministry has called on mining companies to see forest reclamation in areas where they operate as an investment rather than just an obligation. Last year, the government issued a regulation obliging mining firms to conduct reforestation in the forest areas they had cleared for mining operations but only a few had done so mainly due to weak oversight. This has sparked concerns about the state of the country's forests, which have been deteriorating in the past decades due to industrial development.

Data from the ministry showed that in 2006, there were 77.8 million hectares of land in a critical condition, a three times increase compared to the 23.2 million hectares recorded in 2000. Other data shows that currently there are 117 companies with activity permits on 600,000 hectares, 257 companies with principal permits on 160,000 hectares and 95 companies with use permits on 54,000 hectares.

Hadi Daryanto, the ministry's secretary-general, said that if the companies invested in reclamation during their operation, they could reap benefits because the market and public now expected companies to be green and sustainable. "We want to show that mining in forests does not have to result in total habitat destruction. We hope we can establish best practice mining and that restoration will set an Indonesia Industry Standard for others to follow," he said during the launch of the initiative on Wednesday.

He said that the firms should not wait until they finished their whole mining operation in an area to begin restoring the environmental damage they caused. The 2010 regulation does not set a time frame for when a company should begin the reclamation process.

The initiative launch featured Sustainable Management Group (SMG), an Indonesian-led consulting company focusing on nature based tourism and conservation, who said that if forest restoration was carried out while the mining companies were still in operation, the companies not only improved their image but also created a more sustainable use of the nation's natural resources.

David Makes from SMG explained that the companies should move their mining activity to a new area inside their territory within several years and restore the previously mined area.

"The fix-as-you-go method can optimize the use of organically active topsoil and help companies to refine the approaches annually," David said.

He said that there were three restoration options: production forestry (monoculture forest), agro forestry (timber and non timber products as well as food and indigenous species) and biodiversity planting (mixed indigenous species). "A combination of these approaches can also be used," he said.

David cited a case in northern Thailand in which a degraded forest patch was turned back into lush greenery in just eight years, allowing the local people to benefit from the forest again even before the companies had left the area.

Nigel Tucker, senior scientist at Sustainable Management Group, said that for Indonesia's tropical forest-turned-mine land, biodiversity planting would be the best option to apply. He said that basically the mining companies could teach local people how to 'regreen' the area as part of their corporate social responsibility.

"With biodiversity planting, the companies can get the tree seeds from local people. The cost estimation for biodiversity planting is around US\$5,000 per hectare," Tucker said.