

Peatland moratorium slipping on oil palm plans

Aceh may soon lose part of its forests with the granting of a concession for commercial use to a private company by Aceh Governor Irwandi Yusuf, a decision that jeopardizes the moratorium on forest clearing, a watchdog says. The permit issued to PT Kallista Alam to convert the protected peatland forest for use as a palm oil plantation had been legalized, thanks to the first revision of the indicative map set out in the moratorium, Elfian Effendi, the executive director of Greenomics Indonesia, said on Tuesday.

The revision, adopted in a Forestry Minister Decree that was issued on Nov. 22, allows for the issuance of permits to log and convert primary forests and peatland areas, he said.

"This revision of the indicative moratorium map has deleted one block of peatland that was already included within the palm plantation concessions of PT Kallista Alam," Elfian told The Jakarta Post.

The permit, allowing PT Kallista Alam to develop oil palm plantations on a 1,605-hectare plot of protected peatland forest in the Nagan Raya district, which is part of the Leuser ecosystem, was signed by Irwandi on Aug. 25. The forest was initially included in the indicative moratorium map issued on June 17. However, sheet 0519 of the first revision of the indicative moratorium map (officially published on the ministry's website on Dec. 8) shows the areas are no longer protected. "It has been deleted from the revised moratorium map," Elfian said.

Greenomics Indonesia has urged Kuntoro Mangkusubroto as the chairman of the Reducing Emissions for Deforestation and Forest Degradation (REDD) scheme to tell the public about the irregularities. "It shows that the implementation of the moratorium has not been well organized. It lacks synergy and coordination. This is quite an embarrassment," he said.

The issuance of the permit also drew strong criticism from other environmental organizations both in Indonesia and abroad. Kuntoro, who is also the head of the Presidential Work Unit for Development Monitoring and Control (UKP4), a body which monitors the implementation of the moratorium, criticized Irwandi's decision to issue the concession to PT Kallista Alam.

"I spent four years in Aceh during the tsunami reconstruction. Opening up the Kuala Tripa — an area with high conservation value and home to many animals endemic to Indonesia — is a grave mistake," Kuntoro said last week as quoted by Reuters. He also urged the Aceh provincial administration to reexamine the decision and seek an alternative location.

Eivind Homme, Norway's ambassador to Indonesia, has called on the government to investigate the case. During a recent interview, Forestry Ministry secretary-general Hadi Daryanto told the Post that the government would impose sanctions on those responsible for illegally approving the land conversion project.

"It breaches of Presidential Instruction No. 10/2011, issued in May this year, which bans new permits on the clearing of primary forests and peatlands," he said. Greenomics, meanwhile, pointed to an inconsistency in this statement. "It seems they said it just for the sake of having something to say. They don't have enough data to back up their claim. We are now watching quite a huge gap on the moratorium-related information between the policymakers and those who work at the operational level. And this is very misleading information," Elfian said.

To protect against environmental damage, Greenomics Indonesia urges the government to return the peatland area into the indicative moratorium map. With the next revision due in six months time, the forestry minister should immediately issue a letter to overrule the permit issued by Irwandi, he said. The Tripa Peat Swamp in Nagan Raya regency is part of a 4.8 million-hectare area of peatland that was removed from the indicative moratorium map of primary forests and peatlands. Initially, the moratorium map covered 10.7 million hectares of peatlands that were protected against any new permits.

Bambang Soepijanto, the director general of Forestry Planology at the ministry, said the indicative moratorium plan was not permanent.

"If we have new proof showing that the land does not fit the protected peat swamp zoning, we may remove the land from the [moratorium] map," he said, adding that the ministry was still investigating the case.