

Ministry must clarify legality of Chevron's forest clearing

The Forestry Ministry has been urged to clarify the legal status of Cihawuk forest over allegations that PT Chevron Geothermal Indonesia is breaking the law by clearing parts of the forest to build geothermal wells. Chevron has built four wells in the forest, which is located in Kertajati district, Bandung regency.

The West Java legislative council said they would ask for clarification from the Forestry Ministry during a coordination meeting in Bandung, on Thursday, which was attended by subdistrict and district heads as well as representatives from the regency administration, provincial forestry agency, natural resources conservation agency (BKSDA), PT Chevron and state oil and gas company PT Pertamina.

Chairman of the council's Commission B overseeing the issue, Hasan Zaenal, said the council wanted to consider all perspectives in the dispute.

He said it was impossible to stop Chevron's activities because as a partner in a joint operational cooperation with Pertamina, Chevron was obliged to increase electricity supply for Java and Bali as stipulated in the contract with state electricity company PT PLN.

Chevron, which was granted a concession in Cihawuk forest in 1984, has been accused of illegal deforestation because Cihawuk was declared a natural conservation in 2003.

Head of Bandung regency agriculture and horticulture agency, Tisna Oemaran, said that residents had begun reporting that Chevron was cutting down trees in Cihawuk since 2010. They also sent a letter asking for clarification from Chevron on May 3, 2011. The letter received no reply.

"We conducted a field check and found newly built roads, exploration wells and evidence of logging," he said.

The provincial BKSDA stated that the expansion of the exploration wells was based on a memorandum of understanding (MoU) with BKSDA, although the concession license granted by the Forestry Ministry had expired in 2005.

"As far as we can tell, the MoU is not a license but only an agreement. We are questioning the juridical aspect of Chevron's exploitation," Tisna said.

Residents of Cihawuk subdistrict have reported difficulty finding clean water, which they have blamed on Chevron.

"Because we never experienced such a thing before, we suspect that Chevron may have caused it," Cihawuk subdistrict head Aep Saepuloh said.

PT Chevron's government and public relations manager, Alimin Ginting, said that the company needed only 1.8 hectares of land to build the four geothermal wells to fulfill its obligation of supplying 330 megawatts of electricity. It currently produces 271 megawatts from the geothermal wells in Garut, West Java.

He said the company did not take into consideration the status of the forest because its project contract was signed in 1984 with Pertamina.

"Believe us, this geothermal business has to pay attention to the trees because if the water dries up we also won't be able to get steam from a depth of 3,000 meters to turn the electricity turbines," Alimin said.

A legal bureau staff of the Forestry Ministry, Afrodian Lutroisi, said he was not sure if the license issued by the ministry allowed Chevron to operate in forest conservation areas.