

Activists express doubt over 'lungs of the world' plan

Activists were pessimistic that the government plan to allocate 45 percent of forests in Kalimantan as "the lungs of the world" would work, as mining activities and land clearing for oil palm plantations had taken up more than half of the forests on the island.

Elfian Effendi, executive director of Greenomics Indonesia, said the majority of forests in Kalimantan, including conservation areas and protected forests, had in fact been cleared for commercial use, including illegal logging.

He said that in spite of a recent moratorium on new permits for forest clearance, both the central and local governments continued to issue new licences.

"We should question whether 45 percent of the total forest areas are really still covered by vegetation, as central and local governments continue to issue permits," he told The Jakarta Post.

President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono issued Presidential Regulation (Perpres) No.3/2012 on Spatial Planning for Kalimantan on Jan. 5, allocating least 45 percent of total areas on the island as the world's lungs.

A satellite image from 2005 and 2006 obtained from the Forestry Ministry, showed that the total area of forests in Kalimantan was 40 million hectares, comprising 30 million hectares of productive forest areas and 10 million hectares of conservation areas and protected forests.

Of a total of 30 million hectares of productive areas, about 11.5 million hectares were already cleared, while 1.5 million of a total of 10 million hectares of conservation areas had been depressed by deforestation.

"It means that about 13 million hectares, or around 30 percent of the total 40 million hectares of Kalimantan's forest are no longer forests," said Elfian.

Elfian added that deforestation had accelerated in the past five years.

Deddy Ratih, the forestry campaign manager for the Indonesian Forum for Environment (WALHI) said the new regulation could have the potential to trigger land conflict in Kalimantan, given continuing land clearances on the world's largest island.

According to WALHI, about 1.7 million hectares of forests in Kalimantan have been converted into oil palm plantations and mining areas during the last three years.

In Central Kalimantan, Deddy said that the local government had recently issued permits for private companies to clear about 3.7 million hectares of forest for oil palm plantations. Of 336 companies who worked on the plantations, only 268 companies had secured the permit, he said.

Meanwhile, all of 598 companies who converted 3.4 million hectares of forest into mining areas in Kalimantan had no permit to carry out their operations, Deddy told the Post.

Local governments in the three provinces of Central, East and West Kalimantan had recently submitted land conversion proposals to the Forestry Ministry to clear about 1 million hectares of forests in their respective territories.