

Government's Citarum River dredging project kicks off

Residents living in flood-prone areas in Bandung, West Java, will likely be safe from the Citarum River, the largest river in the province, as the government is initiating the Rp 1.3 trillion (US\$145.6 million) Citarum River normalization project on Wednesday.

Public Works Minister Joko Kirmanto will inaugurate the project at the flood-prone Baleendah district, Bandung regency, some 15 kilometers south of Bandung city. The dredging project will stretch some 180 kilometers.

Citarum River Area Center head Hasanudin said the labor-intensive project was expected to be completed in three years and would minimize the annual flooding of as much as 7,000 hectares as the Citarum River swells during the rainy season, which usually leaves Bandung, Purwakarta, Karawang and Bekasi regencies inundated.

"The project will simultaneously be carried out from Sapan in Bandung regency, Najung and Jatiluhur in Purwakarta and Muara Gembong in Bekasi," Hasanudin told The Jakarta Post in Bandung on Tuesday.

The normalization project includes dredging millions of cubic meters of sediment, making sheet piles for embankments, pedestrian bridges and straightening a number of stretches thus far regarded as impeding the river flow.

Hasanudin said the project came in anticipation of the quinquennial flooding that usually engulfs some 12,000 hectares in river basin areas. The last floods were in February of last year, leaving 50,000 hectares of farmland in Karawang flooded for three weeks.

Some 250 NGO community empowerment groups will help educate residents living near the Citarum River, showing them how to protect the river basin areas. The NGOs will encourage residents to recycle waste rather than dump it into the river.

Domestic waste is believed to contribute to 70 percent of the waste in the river. Residents will also be encouraged to replant watershed areas to minimize sedimentation.

West Java Governor Ahmad Heryawan was enthusiastic about the project. He felt that the central government's intervention in the complex Citarum issue was crucial because the river had a very strategic function.

"Hopefully, the normalization project will run smoothly and resolve the problems facing residents who live along the Citarum River," Heryawan said.

The West Java Citarum River Basin Area Forum, under the auspices of the Forestry Ministry, has raised doubts over the government's intervention in the issue. It previously urged the central government to return the river management program to the province, because the government's policies tended to be centralistic and were deemed to worsen degradation in terms of water quality and quantity.