

Haze shrouds Riau Islands, Sumatra as wildfires expand

Riau Islands province and its surrounding areas were shrouded in a haze that reportedly originated from fires in a number of plantations on Sumatra over the last few days. The National Disaster Mitigation Agency (BNPB) on Monday opened a Haze Disaster Emergency Field Post at Sultan Syarif Kasim II Airport in Pekanbaru, Riau Islands, as haze in the province worsened. The BNPB Emergency Response director Tri Budiarto said the post was focused on aerial fire fighting operations, adding that it was designed to help forest and peatland fire fighting operations in Jambi and South Sumatra.

“A similar post has also been opened in Palangkaraya [Central Kalimantan] to cover Central Kalimantan and West Kalimantan, which are also prone to forest and peatland fires,” Tri told The Jakarta Post after the inauguration of haze disaster mitigation operations in Pekanbaru.

The BNPB, together with the Applied Technology and Research Agency (BPPT), has also opened a Weather Modification Technology (TMC) command post in an effort to mitigate haze, forest and peatland fires.

“The cloud seeding operation with the BPPT will be conducted for 40 days from now. The cost to setting up the TMCs in Sumatra amount Rp 10 billion (US\$1.1 million), derived from the state budget,” said Tri.

He acknowledged that haze mitigation posts were aimed at making the National Games (PON), held in Riau from Sept. 9 to 20, a success.

“We are referring to the haze threat index. There is a tendency that in the next month the haze will further intensify. This is part of anticipatory measures. The BNPB does not want to be in a position where actions are taken only after conditions are at their worst,” Tri added.

Based on satellite images gathered by the Forestry Ministry’s Conservation Directorate General, the number of hot spots reached 15,392 as of Aug. 9 this year, concentrated in Sumatra and Kalimantan. Most of the hot spots are found in Riau (3,486 points), followed by South Sumatra (2,359), West Kalimantan (2,105), Jambi (1,341) and Central Kalimantan (978).

In Medan, the haze covering the city and surrounding areas in North Sumatra over the last three days was believed to have been caused by forest burning. The Data and Information section head at the Medan Polonia Meteorology Station Mega Sirait said the thick haze blanketing Medan and surrounding areas since Aug. 10 had not yet disappeared.

“The haze is caused by forest fires. As long as forest burning activities continue and there is a lack of rainfall, the haze will cover Medan city,” said Mega.

Mega said the haze in Medan originated from several provinces in Sumatra. Mega added that in the province, forest burning activities were detected in Padang Lawas, Deli Serdang, Asahan and Labuhan Batu agencies.

According to Mega, the haze in Medan and surrounding areas had currently restricted visibility at Polonia Airport to between 2,000 and 3,000 meters. He added that although it had yet to impact on flights, residents, especially motorists, had been advised to be aware of limited visibility.