

Forest conversions must end, say groups

Environmental activists have called on the Indonesian government to extend the 2011 moratorium that bans the issuance of any new permits for land conversion on primary forests and peatlands. They said that the moratorium, which is valid for two years, had not been effective in curbing rapid forest degradation that resulted from excessive land conversion and had affected the livelihoods of the local people.

Jefri Gideon Saragih of the Sawit Watch said on Friday that land-clearing for oil palm plantations had devastated forested areas in the country. "Despite a government-imposed moratorium, forest clearing continues, severely affecting people who depend on the areas for their livelihoods," he told The Jakarta Post. Land clearing had moved deeper into the forests due to the absence of both a unified map that clearly defines the forest-covered areas in the country, and spatial planning guidelines in the regency and municipality levels, he added.

High demand for palm oil has driven rapid forest loss in several areas such as in Sumatra and Kalimantan. Trees are felled for the cultivation of oil palm plantations, which results in biodiversity loss and erodes the livelihoods of the local people. Out of the total 189.66 million hectares of land in the country, 8.38 million hectares or 4.4 percent of the total are oil palm plantations. Ongoing land use changes suggests that the current figures may actually be higher. Every year, an estimated 400,000 hectares of forested areas are converted into oil palm plantations, Sawit Watch data shows.

"It remains in question whether we need to expand oil palm cultivation because many companies have in fact used palm oil schemes merely to obtain access to bank loans instead of carrying-out better management practices at their oil palm plantations," Jefri said, adding that audits should be carried out by the government on all licenses it had issued to the oil palm companies. In a year-end statement, Agriculture Minister Suswono said his ministry agreed on the revocation of the moratorium. If the moratorium is terminated, more land for oil palm plantations would be available, potentially creating more income sources and job opportunities.

"I don't think the moratorium should be extended. We have to be more selective in granting permits to oil palm companies," he said. According to the Indonesian Palm Oil Association (GAPKI), the country will still have a palm oil surplus in the long-term. Around 70 percent of palm oil products are exported as crude palm oil (CPO) and derivative products. In 2011, palm oil export earnings reached approximately US\$19.7 billion.

"In 2020, the country's production of palm oil has been predicted to reach 40 million tons, with exports amounting to 20 million tons," said GAPKI secretary general, Joko Supriyono, during a recent discussion.

The 2011 presidential instruction (Inpres) issued in May 2011 prohibits the issuance of any new license for conversion of primary forests and peatlands. This is one of the most important parts of the bilateral agreement outlined in a letter of intent (LoI) between the governments of Indonesia and Norway to strengthen cooperation in reducing greenhouse gas emissions from deforestation and forest degradation.

Zenzi Suhadi of the Indonesian Forum for the Environment (WALHI) said that the government should have primary forests and peatlands permanently banned from conversion to any other land use instead of just extending the moratorium. "It seems to me that the government sees land as 'productive' only if it can generate royalties, while for local communities, the value of a forest is not just measured in rupiahs as the forests are also part of their livelihoods," he told the Post.

As of 2012, 5 million hectares of forested areas had been converted to oil palm plantations, WALHI data shows. About 20 million hectares of forested areas are currently being allocated by the government to be converted to other land use, the Forestry Ministry statistics shows. Last year, WALHI Aceh filed a case against Governor Irwandi Yusuf at the Aceh administrative court for his decision to give PT Kallista Alam a permit to convert hectares of the protected peat swamp forest into oil palm plantations. It argued that the palm oil concession had violated the country's moratorium on new forest concessions that was signed in May 2011.

