

Govt urged to protect Batang Toru forest

Environmentalists in North Sumatra are urging the central government to declare the 136,284-hectare Batang Toru forest in North, South and Central Tapanuli a protected area, arguing that it acted as a buffer against floods, erosion and landslides in the region.

Yayasan Ekosistem Lestari chairman Sofyan Tan said it was urgent that Batang Toru was declared a protected forest because the damage in the area had reached an alarming level that was threatening the ecosystem and biodiversity of the region.

He said a proposal had been sent to the central government last year but there had been no response. "Illegal logging and land clearance are out of control. This has to be stopped by declaring the region a protected area," Sofyan recently told a forum on Batang Toru preservation strategies in Medan, North Sumatra.

Indonesian Forum for the Environment (Walhi) North Sumatra director Kusnadi concurred, saying the area was likely to sustain further damage because parts of it were productive forests while others were mining and plantation areas. Kusnadi said that of the total area of Batang Toru, only 18.58 percent was protected while the remaining 68.7 percent was productive areas and 12.7 percent were mining and plantation areas.

Underlining the urgency of declaring Batang Toru a protected area, Kusnadi said the forest was a biodiversity hot spot that hosted rare and protected species, including orangutans, Sumatran tigers and tapir. The forest, according to Kusnadi, also contributes a great deal to the stability of water supplies for businesses located downstream, including the Sipansipahoras and Sarulla hydropower plants.

North Sumatra Regional Representative Council (DPD) lawmaker Parlindungan Purba voiced support for the proposal. Citing an example of damage to the forest, he said the presence of PT Teluk Nauli in Batang Toru had led to widespread land clearance and illegal logging that resulted in erosion and frequent landslides in the cleared areas.

"I will ask the forestry minister about the proposal. The problem is, up to now, no decision has been made," Purba said. Provincial Forestry Agency head JB Siringo-Ringo confirmed that the proposal had been submitted to the central government and was currently being discussed by a Forestry Ministry team.

"I heard it was nearing the final stage. Let's wait and see," Siringo-Ringo told the forum.

He added that if the proposal was not accommodated by the ministry, preserving the Batang Toru area would be a major challenge. He promised to try to find other ways to protect the forest from further damage. "We will continue protecting Batang Toru even though the proposal might not be accommodated by the central government," he said.