

1253 Companies Should be Held Responsible for Poisonous Gas from Forest Fires

Jakarta, 19 November 2019. Amidst the year-long recurring forest fires, the Indonesian government has a bigger responsibility at hand than just putting out the fires, namely addressing haze victims that have inhaled poisonous gas of PM2.5 resulting from forest and ground fires. It is time that law enforcement targets not only the owners of land or concessions that burn, but also those responsible for haze victims that suffered from the poisonous gas. Forest fires may have (temporarily) stopped, but the impacts will still be felt by the victims until the next 20-30 years, according to Muhammad Teguh Surya, Executive Director of Yayasan Madani Berkelanjutan during a Media Discussion “Poisonous Gas from Forest Fires 2019, Whose Responsibility?” in Jakarta.

Up to 2019, Madani found at least 836 hotspots in palm oil permit areas, 247 in timber plantation concessions, 170 in logging concessions, and 111 hotspots in Indicative Area for Social Forestry (PIAPS) that have not been granted to communities. There are companies whose lands burn every year since 2016 to 2019 as shown by the burn scar. This indicates an urgent need for a breakthrough measure to stop the haze calamity.

“We can say that 1253 companies should be responsible for the poisonous gas of PM2.5 resulting from forest fires in 2019,” said Fadli, Madani’s GIS Specialist.

Madani and Riau Advocacy Group (KAR) conducted a special analysis for Riau Province, which saw the highest number of hotspots during the observation period of January-August 2019, namely 13,656 hotspots. Based on hotspots data from LAPAN and VIRS in September 2019, the top three districts with the highest numbers of hotspots are Indragiri Hilir, Indragiri Hulu, and Rokan Hilir.

The high number of hotspots in Riau is hazardous since most Riau’s land area is peatland. Madani’s spatial analysis shows that most of the hotspots in Riau are located in peatland area, which depth varies from 0.5 up to 2 meters or shallow to medium-deep.

Hotspots in Riau also occurred in peatland restoration priority areas, the majority even located in protected priority peatland restoration areas. The total size of indicative burnt area in peatland restoration priority areas in Riau reaches 49,117.9 hectares with the following details: 16,467.2 hectares in protected peatland restoration priority area without canal, 16,027.9 in peat dome area with cultivation function, 7,886.7 hectares in protected peatland with canals, and 8,756.1 hectares in post-burnt area of 2017.

Investigation conducted in 14 villages in Riau shows that 11 villages were burning during the period of April to 20 September 2019, including 7 villages that became the site of Peatland Restoration Agency’s peatland restoration program. Five villages had been previously burnt while 2 had not.

The poisonous gas of PM2.5 resulting from the forest fires have caused an increase in the number of diseases suffered by the impacted communities. According to the Provincial Health Service of Riau, the biggest proportion of diseases caused by the forest fires and the resulting haze disaster from January 2014 to August 2019 are coughs, Acute Respiratory Infection, pneumonia, skin infection, lungs tuberculosis, and several other degenerative diseases. The number of Acute Respiratory Infection case is the highest in Riau compared to other diseases with an increasing trend each year. Meanwhile, in 2018, around 31.4

percent of pneumonia among toddlers in Indonesia occurred in Riau, the highest in Siak District (86.9 percent), Pelalawan (72.8 percent), Dumai (64.4 percent), and Meranti Island (59.6 percent).

Public health distress caused by the forest fires resulting in the spread of the poisonous gas of PM2.5 should become the responsibility of land and concession owners whose land were burning in addition to the government's. They must also take responsibility to address the haze victims.

"Besides, prevention of forest fires and addressing the victims of haze must become the government's main priority and be integrated in the national and regional development plan," Teguh added.

For that purpose, the government must prepare the necessary infrastructure to help the haze victims, both during the forest fires and in the long-run after the fires subside, including risk mitigation measures. The government is also due to conduct socialization regarding the dangers of haze and the emergency measures plan that must be carried out. In addition to that, the government must provide free health facilities in impacted areas to care for the haze victims, which must be funded through the national/regional government budget. Last but not least, the government must accelerate and strengthen peatland restoration efforts after 2020, review all licenses, and strengthen enforcement of the environment law to eradicate forest fires from its roots so that the goal of President Joko Widodo to achieve quality human resources in Indonesia can be realized.

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