

Rizal Harahap, The Jakarta Post, Pekanbaru / Wed, 03/02/2011 11:14 AM / The Archipelago

Fires have ravaged forests in Bengkalis regency, Riau province, for four days, destroying hundreds of hectares of peatland between Ketam Putih and Kelemantan villages, Bengkalis district, and Bantan Air village, Bantan district.

Dozens of fire fighters from the Environmental Body (BLH), Forestry Agency and Bengkalis Plantation struggled to contain the fires due to the scarcity of water, intense heat and strong winds.

Suiswantoro, a BLH official, said the teams were struggling to prevent the fires from spreading to residential areas.

“The burning is difficult to contain because it is spreading underground. We may have extinguished the fires on the surface, but the burning underneath may be growing at another location,” he said.

Suiswantoro attributed the fires to people recklessly clearing land by burning the bushes. “Usually, there are always people taking the opportunity during the dry season to clear the peatland by burning,” he said.

Bengkalis Regent Hasan Basri expressed his irritation over the incidents because he said he had warned people against clear-burning the peat during the dry season.

“It appears that the supposedly low-cost mechanism in clearing land is still used,” he said.

He said he urged the police to find and sanction the perpetrators. “People should not indiscriminately burn the land and expect officials to show up and extinguish the fires. Remember, the government does not just care about fire,” he said.

Councilor Abu Bakar Siddik said the repeated incidents signified the government’s ineffective preventive efforts. He said the Environmental Body and Forestry Agency would look busy only when fires took place.

“They seem to have forgotten that preventive efforts should be more important than curative efforts,” he said.

“A team will move only after residents raise the alarm,” he said.

