

"If the government wants to end peatland conversions, there is no story about timelines; it must be permanent," executive director of Forest Watch Indonesia Wirendro Sumargo told The Jakarta Post.

"No matter how deep the peatland is, the area should become a conservation area and protected."

Currently, the peatland with a depth of less than 3 meters, can be converted into business purposes, from residential to oil palm or for mining companies.

Wirendro said the government should provide financial compensation for the relocation of existing companies in the peatland into other areas.

"If not, the peatland will continue releasing emissions, even with the five-year moratorium," he said.

The government has pledged to suspend new permits to converse remaining natural forest and peatland for two years starting 2011.

The pledge was made after Indonesia and Norway signed a US\$1 billion deal to cut deforestation in Indonesia, home to the world's third largest forest at 120 million hectares.

But a draft presidential regulation is proposing the five-year moratorium on peatland conversion though it did not refer to the Norway deal.

The draft says the moratorium is aimed at meeting the country's promise to cut 26 percent of emissions to mitigate climate change.

It says the government will re-examine all peatland concession permits during the moratorium, including existing ones.

The government will also assess financial benefits from a huge stock of carbon in peatland that could be saved from the moratorium, according to the draft.

In addition, a restoration management unit will also be established to reclassify the degraded peatland as protected area.

Indonesia has more than 21 million hectares of peatland, including 8 million hectares in Papua, 7.2 million hectares in Sumatra and 5.8 million hectares in Kalimantan.

The country's peatland forests contain an estimated 46 gigatons of carbon.

Executive director of Wetlands International Nyoman Surtadiputra said that using a five-year moratorium could not answer the main problems of peatland in Indonesia.

"The moratorium is only added value for the emission cut program, but it would not solve the basic problems since many oil palm companies and industrial forest concessions [HTI] are operating in peatland," he said.

He said the opening of business activities in peatland would drain the area and speed up the release of emissions.

Nyoman criticized the lack of coordination on the government's part in managing peatland.

"We noted there are at least four controversial policies related to peatland," he said.

He said that the Public Works Ministry's plan to review the government regulation on swamp areas aiming to revitalize water canals could further impact on the release of emissions in the area.

He said the government plan to develop 1.6 million hectares of food estate in Papua mostly would be in peatland areas.

“Legally, Papua’s peatland can still be utilized since its depth is less than 3 meters; but if the government is committed to a moratorium, there should not be such a project in Papua’s peatland,” he said.

The 2009 agriculture ministry’s decree has regulated that if 30 percent of total concessions in peatland are at a depth of more than 3 meters, the area could not be conversed.

“The Environment Ministry is currently drafting a government regulation on peatland but still allows business in the area,” he said.

He said that the government should first review all the policies on peatland.

“It is also urgent for the government to map a location of peatland, including its thickness, and determine the most-prone peatland areas on fires,”

“The concrete action is to run a ground check and close all water canals in the One Million Hectare Peatland Project [PLG] in Central Kalimantan to reduce emissions.”

— JP/Adianto P. Simamora