

No Burning For Oil Palm Planting And Replanting



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Indonesia was repeatedly blamed for 'producing and exporting' hazes to its neighbouring countries. The disastrous and the biggest forest fires disaster happened in 1997/1998 respectively followed with other occurrences in 1999 and 2002. The experience of the haze in 1997 over the region for several weeks was estimated to cost almost US\$10 billion in economic losses, and more losses in terms of people's health and inconveniences. The Germany Technical Co-operation agency (GTZ) – IFFM assessed that a total area of 10 million hectares were affected of which 3.33 million hectares were forests (Wakker, 2000).

The government initially blamed the fires on the El Nino drought and smallholders' shifting cultivation (Anon, 1997) but evidence from satellite imagery and maps of active fires (hot spots) indicated that the most extensive fires and the greatest amounts of smoke originated from government sanctioned corporate plantation development, logging concessions, and largescale land-clearing/development projects (Hoffmann et al., 1999; Potter and Lee, 1998a; Stolle et al., 2003) (Human Ecology, Vol. 33, No. 4, August 2005).

There are reasons to use fire for land clearing and wastes disposal in oil palm plantations:

1. Burning is perceived by many as cheaper than other ways of clearing lands
2. Banks tend to promote burning practices because this will open up concession areas faster and reduce the time until the first harvest, allowing their clients to pay debts earlier
3. Plantation companies and contractors are simply not accustomed to others means of land preparation.

In early August 2005, the Indonesian authorities detected 788 fires in Riau, Sumatra. The Indonesian Forestry Minister told reporters, "The major fires are in oil-palm plantations." (Buckland Helen, September 2005)



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