

Global tropical peatland center to be established in Indonesia

By Hans Nicholas Jong
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JAKARTA – The Indonesian government is working with peat experts to establish a global center for tropical peatlands just south of the capital, Jakarta.

The details about the proposed institution, in the city of Bogor, will be discussed next year, said Nazir Foad, the head of Indonesia's peatland restoration agency (BRG).

—After that, we will decide on the details of the center, such as its concept, the size of its office and how many people will be involved, he told reporters on the sidelines of an event in Jakarta.

The idea behind the center came last month, when 57 peatland experts from various countries issued the —Jakarta Declaration on the Responsible Management of Tropical Peatland.

One of the five strategies stated in the declaration is the establishment of a tropical peatland center, which will serve as a research and information center.

Much of the interest in tropical peatlands revolves around their function as carbon sinks; tropical peatlands are believed to hold more than 30 percent of total global peatland carbon.

Nazir said it was only appropriate for a global-scale tropical peatland center to be located in Indonesia, given that the country is home to 36 percent of the world's tropical peatlands, more than any other country.

Indonesia has a mixed record when it comes to managing and protecting its peat forests. Vast swaths of peatland have been lost in recent decades after being drained and cleared for industrial-scale plantations. Drying out the peat renders it highly flammable and risks releasing the huge amounts of carbon that it stores.

This has led to recurring forest fires, with one of the worst episodes occurring in 2015, when smoke from the conflagration blanketed Indonesia and neighboring countries in a choking haze, sickening half a million people, according to government figures.

In the wake of that disaster, the Indonesian government put in place a series of policies to protect peatlands across the country, as well as intensified its efforts to monitor and extinguish land fires.

As a result, fire incidents have decreased in intensity, with the number of hotspots this year down by 66 percent from 2016 and 94 percent from 2015, according to data from the Ministry of Environment and Forestry.

Nazir said other countries could learn from what Indonesia was doing to protect its peatlands, adding that the planned research center would facilitate that learning process.

—We have a lot of experience and research in peat restoration and protection. Our peat policies are good and robust, he said. —Countries in Europe and South Africa are very interested in seeing what we've been doing and it is our moral responsibility to share our knowledge with them.



Haris Gunawan, deputy of research at the BRG, said Indonesia's past mistakes in managing its peatlands and the subsequent lessons learned had placed the country in a unique position to share knowledge about best practices when it came to tropical peatlands.

—We have a before-and-after situation, he said. —So we have to think about establishing a tropical peat center which has all kinds of information, such as technology, science, innovation and practices that we've done before and after forest fires.

The Indonesian government, through the BRG, has also intensified its research into peatlands. Last week, the agency presented 13 studies carried out in conjunction with 12 universities and two research institutions.

Nazir said some interesting findings emerged from the studies, such as ways to block peat-draining canals while still allowing boats to pass through. The studies also looked at ways to block the canals — which are typically dug by plantation companies to start clearing the land

— using materials other than wood, given its increasing scarcity.

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