

Singapore Smog Reaches 'Hazardous' All-Time High on Fires

By Kyunghee Park & Jasmine Ng - Jun 20, 2013 6:39 AM GMT+0800

Singapore's smog level reached an all-time high yesterday evening, prompting the government to unveil plans to use satellite imagery to identify companies involved in forest burning on the Indonesian island of Sumatra.



A couple looks over the city skyline under haze from a bridge in Singapore. Local reports warned that haze continues to envelope over the city-state as a result of fires in Sumatra, Indonesia, Singapore's neighboring country. (AP Photo/Wong Maye-E)

Singapore's pollution index jumped to 321 at 10 p.m. yesterday, the National Environment Agency, or NEA, said on its website. That's a record, according to Channel NewsAsia. A reading above 300 is deemed "hazardous." The reading had dropped to an "unhealthy" level of 137 by 6 a.m.

The Malay Peninsula has been plagued for decades by forest fires in Sumatra to the west and Kalimantan on Borneo island to the east. The current smog could hurt the city-state's services industries such as tourism, according to Wai Ho Leong, an economist at Barclays Plc in Singapore. The Gardens by the Bay, a park in central Singapore, said on its website it will close some attractions if the pollution index is above 100.



Tourists ride in a cable car as their surroundings are blanketed by haze in Singapore on June 19, 2013. Photograph: Roslan Rahman via AFP/Getty Images

Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong said in a Twitter post he's "dismayed" with the pollution index yesterday and plans to meet his ministers "first thing" in the morning to update plans on the situation before briefing the press. Singapore armed forces stopped all outfield training indefinitely and all soldiers have been given masks, the Straits Times reported today.

Taskforce Convened

At an emergency press conference held at 11:30 p.m. last night, Environment and Water Resources Minister Vivian Balakrishnan said nobody should pollute and make money at others' expense, according to a Twitter post by Channel NewsAsia. Singapore has convened a taskforce and will use high-resolution satellite pictures to link specific hotspots to companies, he said, according to Channel NewsAsia.

A stop-work order may be issued by the Ministry of Manpower depending on the seriousness of the situation, Balakrishnan said at the press conference, according to Channel NewsAsia. Schools may also close if the situation persists when they are due to reopen, he was reported as saying.

The city-state's Changi airport has taken precautionary measures to increase the time between takeoffs and landings of aircraft to ensure the safety of flight operations, the Civil Aviation Authority of Singapore said in an e-mailed response to Bloomberg.

A week of “unhealthy” readings may shut down leisure travel into Singapore for at least a month, maybe longer, Leong said. “That disruption could mean roughly \$1 billion in terms of reduced shop takings, empty rooms, fewer flights.”

Urgency of Situation

Singapore’s Foreign Affairs and Law Minister K. Shanmugam emphasized the urgency of the situation and the country’s commitment to help fight the fires during a telephone call with Indonesia’s Foreign Minister Marty Natalegawa on June 18, according to a statement by the government.

“Minister Shanmugam and Minister Marty agreed that bilateral and regional cooperation could be further strengthened to tackle the haze problem,” the government said in the statement.

Balakrishnan also spoke with his counterpart, Minister Balthasar Kambuaya to share relevant information to improve monitoring of hotspots and land clearing activities, the city-state’s government said.

The two Singapore ministers asked the Indonesian government to share the names of the companies involved in “illegal burning, though primary responsibility to take legal and enforcement actions against these companies lies with Indonesia as they have clearly violated Indonesian laws within Indonesian jurisdiction,” the Singapore government said.

Reassurances Offered

“Both Minister Shanmugam and Minister Balakrishnan referred to the claim by an Indonesian forestry ministry official in the media that Malaysian and Singapore palm oil companies that had invested in Indonesia may be responsible for starting the fires in Riau,” according to the statement.

Natalegawa and Kambuaya offered their reassurances that Indonesia would address the haze, the Singapore government said.

“There’s still the need to show that this is something the Singapore government finds disconcerting, that it does affect the health of Singaporeans as well as the economy,” said Eugene Tan, assistant law professor at Singapore Management University.

“History suggests that not much will be done,” said Ang Peng Hwa, a media law professor at Nanyang Technological University who runs community group Haze Elimination Action Team. “But not much is better than nothing. And at this stage of severity of the haze, we will take not much.”

Air pollution in parts of Malaysia’s Johor, Malacca and Selangor at 5 p.m. local time yesterday remained “unhealthy,” according to the country’s Department of Environment.

'Zero Burning'

Palm oil companies with operations in Indonesia include Jakarta-listed PT Astra Agro Lestari (AALI), Singapore-listed Wilmar International Ltd. (WIL) (WIL) and Malaysia's Sime Darby Bhd (SIME) (SIME), the world's biggest listed palm oil producer. Firms contacted by Bloomberg said they did not burn land.

"All our replanting, we do zero burning -- that has been the practice since the '80s," Franki Anthony Dass, executive vice president at Sime Darby's plantation unit, said by telephone. "All our operations worldwide, there is zero burning. Anyone caught burning, we take very strict action on the people in charge."

Before Replanting

Sime Darby has about 78,000 hectares planted in Sumatra, Dass said. The firm shreds old trees before replanting.

Wilmar said in an e-mail it also had a zero-burning policy. Golden Agri-Resources Ltd. (GGR) contractors who clear land must comply with its "zero-burning policy," the company said in an e-mailed statement.

Indonesia is the world's biggest palm oil producer. Plantations have expanded rapidly in the past decade as demand grew for an oil used for cooking, soap and biscuits. The government on May 13 extended a policy of keeping virgin rain-forest off-limits to the palm industry, though environmentalists say enforcement has been patchy.

Large tracts of peat lands, around the coastal city of Dumai facing Singapore have caught fire, leading to this week's smog, according to The Straits Times, which cited Indonesian officials. Farmers are also burning plantations to clear land for the next sowing season, the report said.

The fires hit a peak in 1997, when haze cost the economies of Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore an estimated \$3.5 billion, based on figures published in a report by the Center for International Forestry Research in Bogor, Indonesia.