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Sumatra's peat swamp forest threatened with collapse, must be protected

Environmental organizations: Unique forest ecosystem in Riau province, Indonesia must be protected of further damage by loggers and paper industry

Environmental organizations Jikalahari, CAPP, ROBIN WOOD and Friends of the Earth from Indonesia, Finland and UK warn today that one of the largest tropical peat swamp forests in the world might collapse if logging operations and conversion of peat swamp forests into plantations by the paper companies APRIL and APP continue.

Lowland rainforest on the Indonesian Island of Sumatra has been almost entirely destroyed. The Kampar peninsula in the province of Riau still contains more than 400,000 ha of peat swamp forest making it one of the largest remaining lowland forests in Sumatra. It provides habitat for the Sumatran Tiger and other species threatened with extinction. Destruction of these peat swamp forests releases significant amounts of carbon that may foil intentions to reduce climate change.

Forests in Riau are still being destroyed to meet the demand of pulp and paper companies APP and APRIL. Together the two paper companies have already devastated a million hectares of rainforest to supply their operations with raw material and convert forest into acacia plantations. In the last two years APRIL alone destroyed 50,000 hectares of peat swamp forest in its Pelalawan concession and built a road to access the Kampar peninsula.

The forest on the Kampar peninsula grows on top of more than three meters of peat soil. Due to the ecological fragility of deep peat soils, this type of forest is protected under the Indonesian law. Clearing and draining peat swamp forests cause peat degradation and disastrous fires. The resulting carbon emissions contribute to the greenhouse effect - in Riau province alone the carbon stored in the peat soils amounts to annual carbon emissions from fossil fuels in the whole world.

A study of ProForest, consultants hired by APRIL to assess ecological impacts of plantations in the Kampar Peninsular, indicates that the company has already damaged the water balance of the Kampar peat swamp by building a controversial road and drains that cut the peninsula in half. The existing road, along with further forest conversion and drains planned by APRIL may lead to the collapse of the entire swamp ecosystem.

The Kampar peninsula was proposed as a national park by Jikalahari in December 2005 because of its cultural significance, unique biodiversity, ecological properties and importance for the world's climate. "Peat swamp forest on Kampar peninsula must be declared protected to stop any further intervention by loggers or the industry, and managed with the full involvement of local communities and indigenous peoples", said Rully Syumanda, forests campaigner for Friends of the Earth Indonesia.

The environmental organizations demand a full stop to clearing of rainforests for pulp production. "As long as APRIL and APP continue to clear-cut natural forests, businesses, governments and nongovernmental organisations should freeze their relationship with this company", says Jens Wieting, ROBIN WOOD's rainforest expert.

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