Eco-Business

New rule clears Indonesia's protected forests for agribusiness

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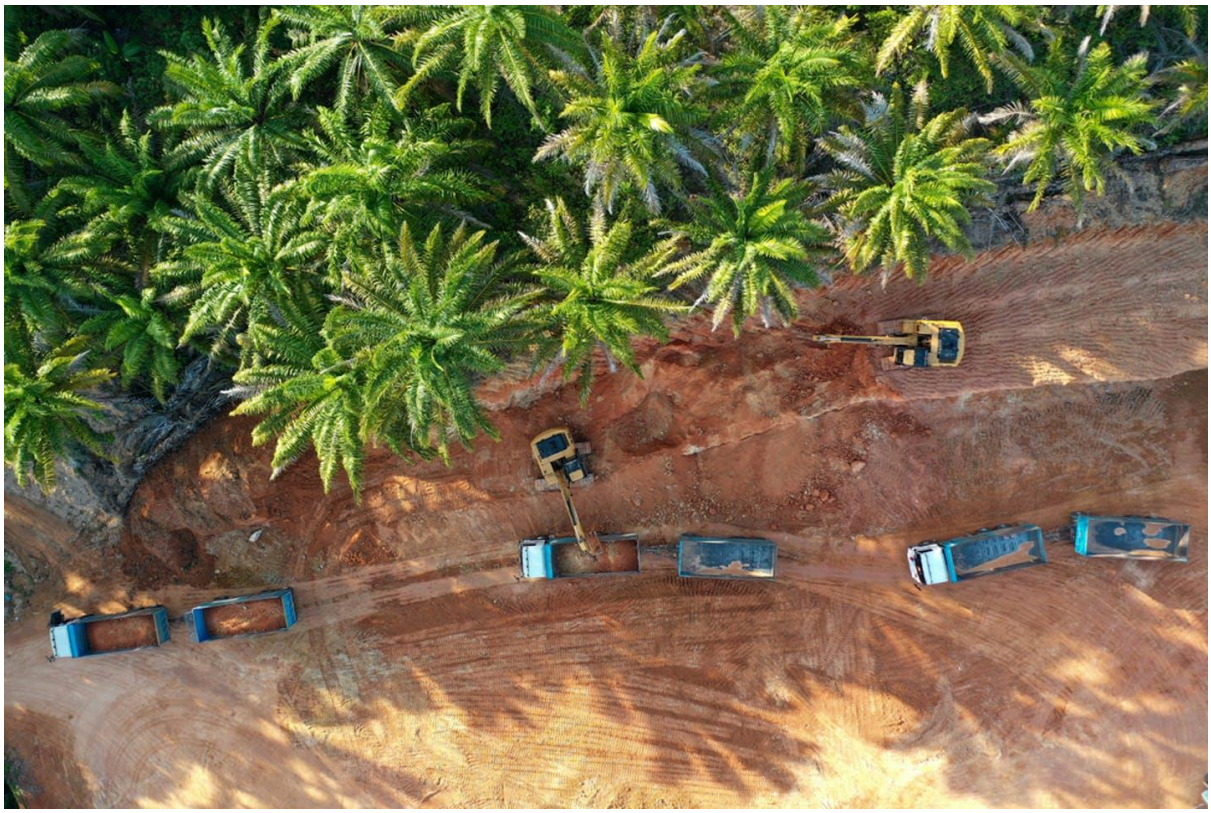

Land cleared to make way for palm oil in Indonesia. Image: richcarey, CC BY-NC-ND 2.0

Indonesia's dwindling forests may be cleared for farmland under a government-led programme to boost domestic food production, raising fears of a surge in deforestation.

The government's "food estate" programme calls for establishing millions of hectares of new farmland, mostly for rice and other staple crops. To ensure there's sufficient land for the programme, the Ministry of Environment and Forestry issued a regulation on Oct. 26 permitting protected forest areas to be cleared for that purpose on a "large scale."

Under existing laws, forest areas in Indonesia are off-limits for plantations unless the ministry issues a forest conversion permit to allow farming there. But under the new regulation, plantation operators won't have to apply for such a permit, and the once-protected forests will be redesignated as "forest areas for food security," or KHKP by the Indonesian acronym.

These areas may be developed as food estates for up to 20 years, extended indefinitely thereafter.

The KHKP regulation has drawn immediate criticism from environmental groups, who warn it strips away what few protections still apply to Indonesia's last remaining swaths of biodiverse rainforest.

"The term 'large scale' indicates that this food estate programme will alter the natural landscape in vast areas, thousands of hectares," Nur Hidayati, executive director of the Indonesian Forum for the Environment (Walhi), said at a recent online press conference. "This is very worrying because there

have never been cases where large-scale land or forest conversion has created a positive impact on the ecosystem or our environment."

Deforestation concerns

There are 29.7 million hectares (73.4 million acres) of protected forest — an area the size of Italy — across Indonesia, representing a quarter of the country's total forest area, according to official data.

There used to be much more: over the past 20 years, the government degazetted 26 million hectares (64 million acres) of forest, or the size of New Zealand, to be exploited for commercial use, predominantly plantations.

The government designates a forest as protected if it meets one of six criteria, such as being located in a watershed area, or having steep slopes, sensitive soil types and high precipitation intensity, among others.

The ostensible goal of maintaining forests as protected is to prevent floods, control erosion, and maintain soil fertility. But the new regulation threatens these objectives by encouraging the destruction of these valuable ecosystems, says Emil Salim, a former minister of environment.

"If natural protected forests can be converted into food estates, the world will lose the only tropical forests in the world's richest archipelago with a variety of biological resources, potential food and untouched medicinal ingredients," he tweeted in Indonesian on Nov. 17. "Now the ecosystem has been changed to monoculture food!"

Daniel Johan, a lawmaker who sits on the parliamentary oversight commission for agriculture, has also criticised the ministerial regulation.

"The biggest concern is that people will flock to and encroach into protected forests to cut down the trees and clear the land, and then this will be legalized by this ministerial regulation," he said. "How do you monitor this on the ground? And we have to talk about the impact of environmental damage, such as landslides and droughts. This should have been considered when making the policy."

Others have flagged the potential for the new regulation to encourage unbridled logging, by waiving timber taxes for logging companies that manage land inside the designated food estates.

"It shouldn't be this way," said Herry Purnomo, a senior scientist at the Center for International Forestry Research (CIFOR).

The risk of deforestation is exacerbated by a recently passed deregulation bill, known as the "omnibus law on job creation," that removes a requirement for local governments to maintain at least 30 per cent of each watershed and/or island area as forest area.

Wahyu A. Perdana, who heads Walhi's department for food, water and essential ecosystems, says this effectively frees up Indonesia's forests to be cleared for the food estate programme, with no legal consequences for the local governments that permit it.

Boon for corporate farming

Daniel, the member of parliament, represents a constituency in Kalimantan, the Indonesian portion of the island of Borneo, which the government has included in its plan for the nationwide network of food estates.

In the districts of Pulang Pisau and Kapuas in Central Kalimantan province, the government has identified 165,000 hectares (407,700 acres) of potential farmland. Most of it sits on wetlands that were targeted for an identical initiative, the Mega Rice Project (MRP), in the mid-1990s. The

government ultimately abandoned that earlier project, leaving behind a dried-out wasteland that burns on a large scale almost every year.

Across the water, in North Sumatra, the government is eyeing 61,000 hectares (150,700 acres) of land on a plateau that straddles four districts.

The new regulation and other policies will ensure that much of that land will be farmed by major corporations rather than small farmers, said Herry from CIFOR, citing the emphasis on “large-scale” estates.

“People usually farm on a small scale, so large scale — estates — is usually [developed by] either state-owned companies or private firms,” he said. “So scale does matter.”

The regulation also makes no mention of food security for small farmers, while coddling big investors, said Dimas Hartono, director of Walhi’s Central Kalimantan provincial chapter.

“Through this ministerial regulation, we see efforts to eliminate people’s rights, which should have been promoted,” he said. “It doesn’t say anything about food sovereignty among the people, but food security managed by big investments. People’s rights to cultivate their lands aren’t stipulated in this regulation.”

That gives big corporations even greater control over Indonesia’s land and forests, including the protected forests that were previously off-limits to them. It also ensures that this new farmland will be used for monocropping: growing a single, economically valuable commodity across large areas, including rice.

But if the food estate programme were to promote community-managed farming instead, it could have less of an impact on biodiversity loss, Herry said. Community farms tend to cultivate a wide variety of crops interspersed among trees, in a system known as agroforestry, to ensure year-round harvests. Agroforestry systems also maintain some of the biodiversity in a given area that would otherwise disappear under a monocrop system.

Jatna Supriatna, a conservation biologist at the University of Indonesia, echoed the view, saying prioritizing agroforestry would allow the protection and rehabilitation of degraded forest areas. He cited the example of shade-grown coffee, which encourages the maintenance of trees. “And as time passes,” he said, “the forests will be healthy.”

Nur from Walhi attributed the food estate programme’s push for monoculture crops on policymakers’ view of forests as being of no value unless they could be logged and cleared for farmland.

“It’s a failure of the government to see forests not as a source of food, so they have to be cut down,” she said.

Why does it have to be protected forest?
The government has responded that only it, and not plantation companies, can propose forest areas that may be degazetted for the food estate programme. It says this should ally any concerns that companies operating illegally inside forest areas may exploit the programme to legitimize their operations.

It also says the only protected forest areas that may be cleared for the programme are those deemed to have already been degraded and thus are no longer serving any of the environmental criteria used to define a forest. And these conversions can only proceed following comprehensive

studies and an environmental impact analysis, said Sigit Hardwinarto, the environment ministry's head of zoning.

"What's most important is that the protected forest areas have to meet the requirement of not having trees no more, or no longer have their functions," he said.

He also said the food estate programme would feature a form of agroforestry, what the government calls "compound land utilization." This will effectively allow designated areas to be used for more than one type of cultivation, from growing food and cash crops, to horticulture, to fish farming.

Herry from CIFOR said this would be a welcome development, but only if the role of small-scale farmers is given greater emphasis across the wider policy.

"If this [programme] wants to be compatible with the public, then it has to be at a small scale," he said. "If it's indeed for companies, then just allocate forests that are already earmarked for companies, such as production forests that may be converted for other uses. These forests are clearly for companies, so there's no overlap and no disguise."

Yanto Santosa, a forestry professor at the Bogor Institute of Agriculture, welcomed the ministry's new regulation, saying it would be a boon for oil palm farmers.

Yanto, who is controversial within the academic community for his views in support of the palm oil industry, said clearing a degraded forest to plant oil palms doesn't constitute deforestation.

"I am very happy because oil palm is supposed to be a food crop and it is a tree as well, even though it's true that it has no timber," he said during a recent online discussion. "We all agree that forests can't be cleared for oil palm, but if they've already been degraded and there is no vegetation, then the [environment] minister said it is allowed, even in protected forest areas."

He said this should only apply to farmers with small plots, not companies running large plantations.

Herry said carbon stock should be the objective measure for how cleared forestland should be replanted, noting that oil palms are notoriously poor at sequestering carbon compared to the old-growth and timber trees of agroforestry farms.

"It's the easiest indicator," he said. "For example, say a forest has a carbon stock of 50 tonnes per hectare. With agroforestry, hopefully it can be increased to 70 tonnes. But if it's replaced by oil palm plantations, it'll decline to 29 tonnes."

Others, however, still see too much of a risk to allow agricultural activities inside protected forests.

"Has the government conducted mapping and a thorough study on the impact [of the programme]?" said Daniel, the lawmaker. "We shouldn't let a policy with a wide impact be carried out carelessly without an in-depth study, especially considering that year after year the size of protected forests keeps shrinking.

"There should be many other options than [clearing] protected forests, such as planting on abandoned agricultural fields," he added. "Why does it have to be protected forest?"

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