

Palm oil firms vow to stop using forests

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Palm oil companies operating in Indonesia pledged to stop expanding plantations into forests in response to growing global criticism about deforestation and to promote more sustainable products.

Executive director of the Indonesian Palm Oil Association (GAPKI), Didiek Hadjar Goenadi, said here Monday palm oil companies would focus on utilizing idle land, including former forest concession areas, to maintain Indonesia as the world's largest crude palm oil producer.

"We realize the environmental impacts by opening all our forests so we will stop touching the forest and just concentrate on abundant lands which have not been cultivated yet," Didiek told reporters during a break in a seminar on climate change, agriculture and trade.

There are currently 6.7 million hectares of oil palm plantations in the country -- half belonging to private firms, while the rest are operated by small-scale farmers. Only about 600,000 hectares are managed by state-owned enterprises.

Didiek estimated there were about seven million hectares of idle land across the country that could be used to plant oil palms or rubber trees.

He said the association's members had applied the so-called roundtable on sustainable palm oil (RSOP), an international initiative promoting sustainability up and down the palm oil supply chain.

"But since many oil palm plantations are operated by farmers, many of them are still unaware about the RSOP regulations. It is the government's task to educate them," he said.

Indonesia's crude palm oil production reached its highest-ever level of 17.2 million tons last year, passing Malaysia, which produced 16 million tons.

Environmental activists have stepped up protests against the country's palm oil companies, accusing the firms of expanding their operations by clearing formerly forested land. The activists say the expansion, including in peatland forests, has killed thousands of orangutans and resulted in huge amounts of greenhouse gas emissions.