« Return to article

Print this

The Straits Times

www.straitstimes.com

Published on Nov 02, 2013

'Let public have access to haze tracking data'

This will enable transparency and accountability, says panel

By Feng Zengkun

DATA from a new haze monitoring system developed by Singapore should be made accessible to the public so they can contribute to it and verify the information.

This call came from a discussion involving more than 20 academics and non-government groups yesterday which aimed to find ways to reduce the region's annual haze.

Fires in Indonesia saw pollution levels hit unprecedented levels in June, many of which were believed to have been caused by companies and farmers clearing land to make way for plantations.

The $100,000 monitoring system combines hot-spot data, high-resolution satellite images and concession maps which can pinpoint areas that firms may have responsibility for. The software will be used by the governments of Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Brunei and Thailand.

But several participants at yesterday's round-table discussion, organised by the Singapore Institute of International Affairs, called for more transparency.

Singapore had pushed for official land use and concession maps - showing where each company is allowed to conduct economic activities - to be made publicly available. However Indonesia and Malaysia resisted the idea, citing legal concerns.

"The problem is that ministers at the national level may be contributing the maps but local governments in Indonesia can issue their own permits to companies without reporting back to the national level," said Mr Fitrian Ardiansyah, programme development director of the Pelangi Indonesia environmental think-tank.

Other participants said making the data public would allow consumers to see which companies have made progress over time so they can avoid the products of those which have not.

However, even if data from the system is not available to the public, Singapore can still play a "watchdog" role.

"Now the governments have no excuse," said University of Malaya senior lecturer Helena Varkkey, who has studied oil palm plantations and their links to fire and the haze. "They are the only ones with access to the information, which gives them greater responsibility to act."

Participants also suggested other ways to lower the risk of haze, such as by requiring companies to put up "fire bonds" in exchange for land concessions. Money from these could go towards fire-fighting efforts or on rehabilitating the land after use.

More research is also needed on the fire risks of different plots of peatland in Indonesia, they said, so its government can better plan land use.

The Universiti Teknologi Malaysia may study how villagers could be connected to social media so they can report on fires, the discussion heard.

An incentive system to reward local governors and companies that prevent fires in their areas could also work.

Participants at yesterday's discussion came from Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore.

zengkun@sph.com.sg