

**ASEAN****Commitment to “Zero-Burn” Policy**

Meeting in Brunei, environment ministers of the States in the Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN) have adopted a new, region-wide zero-burning policy, to counteract the disastrous air pollution of two years ago caused by slash-and-burn agricultural practices.

The three most affected countries are Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia. Malaysia and Indonesia are working on a bilateral policy to fight blazes that could pollute the region. New fires have already been reported in Indonesia’s Sumatra province, and Kuala Lumpur is currently suffering from haze that two years ago polluted skies over Malaysia and Singapore for months.

Ministers said they feared the return of the haze to the region as a result of the new fires in Indonesia and gave that country a tacit ultimatum to implement the zero-burn policy by mid-July. This means Indonesia must take action to prevent new land-clearing fires or punish offenders.

However, according to the Singaporean Environment Minister, *Yeo Cheow Tung*, the country will not be penalized if it fails to meet the deadline. But he added that ASEAN viewed the call as a “test of Jakarta’s resolve.”

In a statement following the meeting, Minister Yeo said “We have set Indonesia a target. By the time the ministers meet next in early July in Kuala Lumpur, we

will want to have a full report from them on the completion of the test projects.” We hope to be able to test the resolve of the Indonesian authorities to mobilise the fire-fighting resources and take firm enforcement actions.”

The ministers said that ASEAN wants Indonesia to adopt the “presumption clause” included in the Association’s Regional Haze Action Plan (RHAP). This requires plantation owners to prove that any fire on their land was not their fault. Owners must also show that they took all necessary actions to stop the fire.

“That onus of proof is a very heavy responsibility, and once the plantation owners realise that they cannot get away with... and that there are going to be severe penalties. I think they will adopt the responsible approach of zero-burning in clearing land, the Singapore minister said.

In the official statement following the meeting, ASEAN said a special task force would be established “to redouble efforts in addressing the fire and haze problem.” Satellites and ground-surveillance will be employed to detect forest fires early.

ASEAN plans to launch an education and publicity campaign to push the zero-burning policy among plantation owners and timber concessionaires in Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore. □