

Indonesia could take back 1.4m hectares of forest cleared for oil palm

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The Indonesian government could take back 1.4 million hectares of forest as part of its ban on land clearing for oil palm plantations, an official said today.

Last year, President Joko Widodo issued a ban on new permits for oil palm plantations for three years, aiming to protect the country's forests. The order also gave the government authority to review existing licenses, and revoke them if the area has not yet been cleared.

Prabianto Mukti Wibowo, a forestry governance official at Indonesia's Coordinating Ministry for Economic Affairs, said 5.8 million hectares of the forest area has been licensed out for oil palm plantations but 1.4 million hectares of it has not yet been converted to plantations and still has good tree cover.

"This is subject to environment ministry evaluation, and following the evaluation results, the coordinating minister can designate the area as state-

owned land for forest area or as (land) for agrarian reform for redistribution," he said.

Indonesia is the world's biggest palm oil producer and environmentalists blame much of the country's forest destruction on land clearance for the crop.

The three-year moratorium is aimed at stopping the expansion of oil palm plantation land while optimising the yield from the existing planted area.

Prabianto said the government is also looking at a combined 3.1 million hectares of forest area that has been converted for palm oil production without proper approval from the environment ministry. Changes in spatial planning over the years may have contributed to the issue, he said.

Aditya Bayunanda, policy and advocacy director at green group WWF Indonesia, said the government should immediately take back intact forest land to signal it is serious about tackling deforestation.

"It's a very strong gesture that the government can deliver, that indeed Indonesia is really serious in handling this issue," Bayunanda said.

The slash and burn practices involved in palm oil production are often blamed for Indonesia's annual forest fires.

Indonesia has spent months battling forest fires this year, its worst since 2015, as fires spread out of control due to an El Nino dry weather pattern and sent choking haze across to neighbouring countries.

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