

Haze: Sarawak Disaster Management Committee ready for possible emergency

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KUCHING: The Sarawak Disaster Management Committee is ready to respond, if the Air Pollutant Index (API) reading for the ongoing haze in Sri Aman breaches the 500 mark, prompting an emergency declaration.

Committee secretariat head Major Ismail Mahedin of the Civil Defence Force, said his team was continuously monitoring the situation, adding that if the API reaches 500, the National Disaster Management Agency would advise the Prime Minister to declare the emergency.

As at 6pm yesterday, Sri Aman registered an API reading of 389 compared with 300 recorded at 2pm, according to data from the Department of Environment's (DOE) website.

According to records, a haze emergency was declared in Kuching on Sept 19, 1997 when a 650 API reading was recorded, marking the most hazardous air quality level believed to have been reached in the country's history.

Sarawak Fire and Rescue Department (JBPM) director Khirudin Drahman said satellite images shared by the DOE showed that the drastic worsening of air quality in Sarawak, was due to its close proximity to the Kalimantan border, with the situation further exacerbated by winds blowing smoke from hotspots in the area.

At the same time, he said it could not be denied that forest fires taking place on 2.6 hectares (ha) in Taman STC within Sri Aman itself, and over 13.2 ha in Betong near Sri Aman, were contributory factors to the increase in API readings in Sri Aman - he said however that these two fires which began early yesterday morning, were not the main cause of the rapid deterioration of air quality.

Khirudin said that the forest fire in Taman STC, which was under control, was not a large one and had been caused by the hot and dry weather, with firemen successfully putting out the fire on Wednesday, only to find it recurring yesterday.

Investigations were underway in reference to the fire in Betong which involved privately-owned estate land, with JBPM in the midst of securing a helicopter to facilitate operations to put out the fire, he added.

In Shah Alam, Malaysian Meteorological Department (MetMalaysia) director-general Jailan Simon told *Bernama* that a second round of cloud seeding in several areas within Peninsular Malaysia, was scheduled to be undertaken this Thursday or Friday, to help reduce the haze.

Cloud seeding in Sarawak is targeted for either Friday or Saturday. - *Bernama*