

Palm oil environmental issues stressed amid negative campaign fears

Friday 6 April 2018, by [AFRIZAL Jon](#), [OMPUSUNGGU Moses](#) (Date first published: 22 March 2018).

Moses Ompusunggu, Jakarta — Joining the wave of what the industry has described as a “negative campaign” against palm oil, three documentaries on oil palm plantations have been released and two of them have garnered international recognition.

One documentary, Austrian filmmaker Werner Boote’s *The Green Lie*, was screened at the 68th Berlin International Film Festival, the Berlinale, last month. Part of the film was shot in Muarojambi regency, Jambi, during the forest fires in 2015.

Another one, American-Indonesian Ashram Shahrivar’s *Sigek Cokelat* (Chocolate Bar), was screened at the Colorado Environmental Film Festival in the US and at the London International World Cinema event.

The most recent is the work of renowned documentary filmmaker, Dandhy Laksono’s *Watchdoc*, titled *Asimetrís*. The film was launched this month and has circulated in the country. The three share one thing in common: they set out to explain the palm oil industry’s detrimental effect on the environment.

Their international and nationwide reception appears to be just in time as the world puts the sustainability of the palm oil industry under greater scrutiny. The industry helps in the production of everyday items in our life like soap, cooking oil, cosmetics and chocolate bars, but has long been linked to deforestation in rainforest countries, including Indonesia.

Ashram said he wanted *Sigek Cokelat* to be an “eye-opening” experience on what was really happening in West Kalimantan palm plantations, referring to the decades-long deforestation that has reduced the habitat of orangutans, while people enjoyed chocolate, the production of which uses palm oil.

The Green Lie address the same issue. “The fact is that [the palm oil industry] has taken over ancestral lands, damaged the environment and has even violated human rights,” said Feri Irawan, an environmentalist in Jambi, who appears in *The Green Lie*, which was nominated for best documentary award in the Berlinale in February.

That kind of criticism has been strongly voiced also by international NGOs, leading to what palm oil producers — notably Indonesia and Malaysia — have called discriminatory and protectionist policies, such as the European Parliament’s approval in January of a bill that will limit the use of palm oil as transportation fuel starting from 2022 and Norway’s ban in 2017 on the public procurement and use of palm oil-based biofuel.

The policies could hurt Indonesia’s exports, the country’s authorities and business players warn. As the world’s largest palm oil producer, Indonesia exported 31 million tons of palm oil last year, or 75 percent of Indonesia’s total output, bringing US\$22.9 billion in foreign exchange revenue.

“Palm oil is one of primary elements of Indonesia’s national interest, notably because it is related to the prosperity of 17 million Indonesian citizens, including smallholder farmers, who directly and indirectly depend on the palm oil industry,” the Indonesian Embassy in Brussels said in a statement after the European Parliament’s move.

International communities have singled out Indonesian oil palm plantations in the chorus of criticism of environmental aspects of the biofuel industry, Indonesian Palm Oil Producers Association (Gapki) board member Fadhil Hasan said on Thursday.

Fadhil gave an instance of the European Union’s stance on Argentina, the world’s leading soy exporter and biggest provider of biodiesel made from its derivatives. “For Argentina, it was the trade aspect that was highlighted. The environmental aspect was not highlighted,” said Fadhil.

The EU set duties in November 2013 of 8.8 percent to 20.5 percent for Indonesian biodiesel producers and between 22 percent and 25.7 percent for Argentine biodiesel producers, in both cases to apply for five years.

The World Trade Organization (WTO) upheld Argentina’s complaint on the bloc’s decision in an appeal ruling in October 2016 and ruled in favor of Indonesia, which also challenged the decision, in January this year.

But there was no punitive action proposed by the European Parliament on Argentina like was announced for Indonesia, Fadhil said, referring to the calls for the banning of palm oil in biofuels in 2021, which was based on environmental concerns.

According to a rating created by the UN’s Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), Argentina is among the top 10 countries that destroy their forests the most, and the FAO calculates the loss has amounted in more than 7.5 million hectares since 1990, environmental news organization Mongabay reported in 2016.

Greenpeace’s forest campaign in Argentina, Hernan Giardini, told Mongabay that “the advance of genetically modified soy production since the mid-1990s until now, and the intensive cattle raising in the north” are the main causes of forest loss in the country.

Gapki has stated on its website that when talking about global deforestation, the accusations against palm oil are “over the top”, especially if compared with deforestation resulting from soy plantations and cattle ranching.

Jon Afrizal contributed to this article from Jambi

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