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Early Alert 2 as haze worsens (HL)

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KUALA LUMPUR, Wed. - Sarawak will activate the national action plan on haze by reducing traffic volume in Kuching and asking industries to begin load shedding as the air quality continues to worsen today.

Science, Technology and Environment Minister Datuk Law Hieng Ding said Kuching has been put on stage two of the "early alert" under the plan, as the air quality reading has surpassed the unhealthy level of 151 on the air pollutant index for over 72 hours.

Therefore, he said the authorities including the State Government would have to activate the action plan which was approved by the Cabinet last week to protect the people from the effects of the haze.

"The relevant agencies should be able to implement the action plan from now as they have been given a week. Furthermore, they are represented in the national haze committee which drew up the plan," Law told reporters after today's Cabinet meeting.

Under stage two, the Road Transport Department, police and local authorities will have to cut down traffic entering the city areas by closing certain roads.

The International Trade and Industry Ministry together with the Department of Environment will ask fuel suppliers to stock up on lower sulphur content fuel, and direct industries to begin overall load shedding, besides reducing usage of liquid fuels by 30 per cent.

The DOE will impose a temporary ban on open burning by revoking all contravention licences issued to companies. All these measures are to reduce emissions which could worsen the hazy condition.

Law said the State Government should also advise the people, particularly those with heart and lung problems, to stay away from affected areas.

The API reading for Kuching has gone up to 180 today, the worst ever for Sarawak. The reading for Monday was also 180 and yesterday 163.

Law said the visibility level in some areas in the State has been drastically reduced, affecting flight schedules. He said the Bintulu airport has been closed for the past two to three days, while Sibul followed suit today.

Visibility level in Sri Aman has been reduced to 300 metres, Miri 600 metres, Bintulu 700 metres and Kuching one kilometre.

Law said satellite images taken last night showed hot spots in Kalimantan and Sumatra had become widespread, indicating an increase in forest fires. There were also three hot spots in Johor.

The haze is expected to continue unless the current wind changes direction and speed.

For Sabah and Sarawak, low level winds are currently blowing from the south and southeast with speeds of between five and 10 knots. In the peninsula, winds are blowing from the southeast and southwest at between 10 and 15 knots.

Law who also revealed the details of the action plan today (Please see chart on Page 4), said he hoped all the relevant agencies would play their role to curb local pollution.

"The Transport Minister and the Deputy Entrepreneur Development Minister have already publicly said they would give their full co-operation in the matter."

He said the people should also give their full co-operation to protect

their health.

Law said the DOE and the Meteorological Services Department had been directed to submit daily air quality reports to the mass media and agencies responsible for implementing the action plan.

The plan would be improved upon if the national committee on disaster management and relief think it necessary. The committee will hold a meeting next month.

Law said Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad also today directed the national haze committee to have regular meetings to work out long-term measures to deal with the haze.

The committee may meet on a weekly basis when there is haze and monthly after that. It will revert to weekly meetings from April next year because of the Commonwealth Games.