Regional cooperation: a hazy issue

ASEAN governments have pledged to work together to end the haze that currently affects Singapore, but cooperation in other environmental issues such as setting common standards for fuel is lacking, roundtable participants said.

Governments have demonstrated the rare will to work together towards legally binding obligations to solve the haze problem, and much work has gone into negotiating and drafting a haze agreement, according to Simon Tay, NEA chairman.

"Indonesia, whose plantations are responsible for the pollution, has fully participated so far and pledged to ratify the agreement, but has not actually signed the treaty. As Mr Tay says: "If this agreement falls at this last hurdle and is not effectively implemented, this will reflect badly on Asean."

Others remained sceptical about the possibility, or even the effectiveness, of political cooperation. "Governance means each country must look after its own interests but there is need for regional co-operation. Asean countries must look to their common interests," said Shell Singapore chairman Lee Tzu Yang.

"Most Asian countries follow international guidelines and recommendations, such as WHO air quality standards, on a voluntary basis. There is no meaningful environmental initiative, or environmental agency, at a regional level. Europe is faring better in this respect because more environmental regulations are driven at regional level," said Steve Puckett, managing director of Tri-Zen, an energy consultancy.

Further, "even if Jakarta ratifies the haze agreement, there are enforcement issues on the ground, just like for many other environmental problems such as illegal logging. Enforcement issues pose greater difficulties when the site of the environmental problem is far from the centre of political decision-making or administrative power," said Jolene Lin, an associate member of the Asia-Pacific Centre for Environmental Law, NUS.

The "Asean way" of decision-making hinders concerted environmental regulation, to the extent that it is a consensual decision-making process and reaching agreement to deal with urgent environmental crises or problems is hard.

There is no independent body that coordinates decision making; as such, most of the climate change related action has been made on a country basis, she added.

"Singapore and Malaysia could take much better leadership," said Christophe Inglis of the Sustainable Energy Association of Singapore. "There are satellite photos showing the fires burning on big plantations and on small farms at their edge, and if the big boys said stop, they would. The question is how to get the big CEOs to give such instructions? Singapore and Malaysia could threaten to publish the photos, exposing the plantations and tarnishing their brand name. Consumers also need to know which end products source output from these plantations. But you don't need much from Indonesia, and it doesn't take big funding or regional cooperation."

"Every stakeholder has a part to play: governments are there to regulate (and align themselves with other governments regarding such global issues, which is what Kyoto is all about) businesses are there to create solutions (technology and services) and allocate capital efficiently so that wealth is generated and NGOs are there to raise awareness and provide checks and balances, thus ensuring that the general (global) interest is heard over vested interests or lobbies," Mr Puckett said.

Meanwhile, Asean could cooperate in other ways that would benefit both business and the environment, said Shell's Mr Lee. If regulations affecting how industry works and consumers buy things could be standardised, it would allow better economies of scale and competition.

Another example are the latest diesel engines that Shell supports for Singapore, he said. "We have one of the best diesel fuels in the world, but we don't get maximum benefit from this fuel unless we renew our diesel engine capital base and use the latest."

The NEA adopted the Euro IV emission standards for diesel vehicles with effect from Oct 1, 2006 — however, only new vehicles must use Euro IV compliant engines, while old vehicles are exempt, it said. The NEA also made the use of ultra low sulphur diesel mandatory with effect from Dec 1, 2005.