

# Govt seeks feedback on law on haze

## Proposed Bill will hold parties liable for causing haze that affects S'pore

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THE Environment and Water Resources Ministry is seeking public feedback on a proposed new law which would hold companies or other entities liable for causing haze that affects Singapore.

Under the proposed Trans-boundary Haze Pollution Bill, corporations, sole proprietorships, partnerships and any other "body of persons" that engage in, authorise, or condone activities outside

Singapore that cause unhealthy levels of haze in the island-state for 24 hours or more can be fined up to \$300,000.

The proposed law, posted on government feedback portal Reach yesterday, says the errant company need not have a presence in Singapore to be liable, but its representatives can be served notice if they are in the country. And if it deliberately ignores requests to prevent or control haze, it can be fined up to \$450,000.

There must be satellite images,

meteorological data, and maps to show the fires on land owned or occupied by a company, and that the wind is blowing smoke towards Singapore.

Under the Bill, those affected by the haze can also bring civil suits against errant parties.

Environment and Water Resources Minister Vivian Balakrishnan wrote on Facebook: "Trans-boundary haze has recurred for too many years in our region."

He noted: "The root cause is commercial. It is not the weather or the environment. Errant companies have been clearing land by illegal burning because it is the cheapest way to do so."

Domestic laws against such

burning are difficult to enforce.

Drafted because "we need to go further", the goal of the proposed new law was to "send a strong signal of deterrence to such errant companies".

Singapore suffered its worst ever bout of haze in June last year.

Recent dry weather has sparked more land clearing. Pekanbaru, the capital of Indonesia's Riau province, was cloaked in haze yesterday.

Among eight companies fingered by the Indonesian government for the haze last year were two with Singapore connections. But Golden Agri-Resources (GAR) and pulp and paper firm April said they have zero-burning policies

and help to fight the fires.

Forest fires damage plantations that provide wood for paper and pulp, said an April spokesman.

"That's why we strictly forbid burning within April concessions and aggressively fight fires that spread from outside areas," he said, adding that they had not yet reviewed the proposed legislation.

A spokesman for GAR said: "GAR and its subsidiary Smart are absolutely against burning... We believe that businesses must act responsibly."

Legal experts and environment groups welcomed the proposal.

Mr Nigel Sizer, director of the global forests initiative at the non-governmental organisation

World Resources Institute, said: "Anything Singapore can do to help hold companies accountable for the harm they do to the climate, air quality, forests and local people should be welcomed."

Associate Professor Burton Ong, of the National University of Singapore law school and deputy director at the Asia-Pacific Centre for Environmental Law, said the new law was innovative as it specifically tackles transboundary air pollution. But it might be difficult to prove that a specific firm caused a fire or had control over its sub-contractors, he said.

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