Govt seeks feedback on law on haze

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

By GRACE CHUA and DAVID EE

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 Transboundary 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 or negligent 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: “Transboundary 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.

Braided 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. In 2013, Singapore banned exports to Indonesia’s Riau province.

GAR and its subsidiary Smart are absolutely guilty of burning... We believe that businesses must act responsibly.”

By RAYMOND CHENG

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, said: “We should do our part to tackle this problem.”

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