



Opinion

Use the law to fight the haze

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Encourage whistle-blowers, and introduce laws that compel producers to clean up their act if they want to ship palm oil products through Singapore

IT'S become an almost annual ritual for Singaporeans during the South-West Monsoon season: the haze is back.

Effortlessly but sadly, I have built my own Pollutant Standards Index meter. I look out my NUS office window. When I cannot see the Pasir Panjang port cranes, just over 1,000m away, I know that the PSI exceeds 200.

How to solve this vexing issue? Environment Minister Vivian Balakrishnan has suggested that consumers bring pressure on agricultural producers through "name and shame". The idea is good but the challenge is: How would we know who is burning the peat lands in Sumatra?

An Indonesian forestry official has countered that Malaysian and Singapore palm oil plantation companies are responsible for the open burning. Dr Balakrishnan and Foreign Minister K. Shanmugam have asked Indonesian ministers to name the companies responsible for the burning. But the silence from the government of Indonesia has been deafening.

Let me suggest two more practical approaches. One is to shift the burden of proof from the consumer to the producer.

We should legislate that palm oil and other agricultural products may be imported or trans-shipped through Singapore only if the product is certified as not produced on land cleared by open burning. This law would be similar to the way that the world regulates trade in endangered species through the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (Cites).

Cites came into effect in 1975. It regulates the export, import and trans-shipment of endangered plants and wildlife. Such plants and animals may be traded only with the proper licence.

We can apply a similar policy to agricultural products. A difference with Cites is that we do not need to wait for an international treaty. We can pass the law on our own.

(With this policy, Singapore could set an international example, just as it has done with "opt out" organ donations, road pricing, and other world-first policy innovations.)

Responsible agribusinesses should have no problem complying with the law. The law would precisely target the companies that are slowly killing us with fine smoke particles. By cutting the sales and profits of the culprits, we would give them a clear financial incentive to clean up their act.

My other suggestion is to revise our environmental law to prohibit any acts, wherever they may be located, that cause air pollution in Singapore. Isn't it ironic that a factory in Jurong that pollutes our air will be prosecuted, but a plantation in Sumatra that pollutes even worse gets off scot-free?

Importantly, the law should also include a whistle-blower provision to reward anyone who provides information leading to convictions. Currently, we are stuck with a free rider problem. It is very costly (perhaps impossible) for any individual person to identify the culprits. The work requires organisation and resources. But the benefit is spread across many, including all of the people in Singapore and West Malaysia. So, the job does not get done.

The purpose of the whistle-blower provision is to give a strong incentive for people to pinpoint those responsible for open burning. Whistle-blowers have been instrumental in exposing white-collar and environmental crime in the United States and Europe.

We can apply the same concept to combat the haze. We might then even get the help of local government officials and plantation workers in Sumatra. The prospect of a whistle-blower reward worth perhaps hundreds of thousands of dollars would certainly focus their minds.

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