



## Viewpoint

## Indonesia's moratorium on new forest licenses: An update



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## ABSTRACT

In 2011 Indonesia decreed a moratorium on forest licenses over 69 million hectares (Mha) in order to suspend haphazard forest exploitation. However, only ~12–22 Mha were actually afforded new protection from licensing. Herein I observe a further 5.5 Mha of moratorium area overlapping forest licenses and therefore subject to excisement from the moratorium. These 5.5 Mha, like the 4.5 Mha excised from the moratorium to date, are not readily explicable outside of small government committees. This highlights the quasi-transparency of the mapping process: the moratorium map is widely disseminated, yet its base data and decisions made on their basis are guarded. Implementing ministries seek to comply with reforms while simultaneously protecting their administrations from upset – an ultimately compromised position with tangible implications. This has undermined acceptance by the inherently sceptical Indonesian conservation community; yet its highly critical 'watch dog' role has ironically contributed by heightening government wariness. The way out of this dynamic is for the ministries to render *all* data public and, critically, be prepared to weather the inevitable wave of data-fuelled attack for the public good.

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## Introduction

In May 2011 Indonesia decreed a two-year moratorium on the issuance of new forest licenses for logging, oil-palm, and wood-fibre plantations (President of Indonesia, 2011). This was part of a larger bi-lateral 'REDD+ Readiness' programme of governmental reform and forest conservation (Norway and Indonesia, 2010; Purnomo, 2012). The moratorium was a response to the haphazard and often illegal system of forest licensing in Indonesia, and thus entailed two goals: (i) cease licensing in 'primary' forest areas, at least temporarily, in order to dampen high rates of forest loss; and (ii) during this cessation, integrate registries, maps, and regulations concerning the extent and status of licences and forest cover, to allow for rational forest management. The latter, so-called "One Map" goal was to be characterised by high levels of data transparency, availability, and scrutiny (Satgas REDD+, 2012b), which would be a notable achievement for Indonesia given its history of corrupt forest management (Barr et al., 2010) and its globally important role as a forest-rich, high-deforestation nation grappling with REDD+ issues. The mapped moratorium area has since undergone four scheduled revisions, and the moratorium extended for another two years as of May 2013. However, the moratorium has

met its goals only tenuously, due largely to 'institutional insincerity' on the part of key government agencies (Sloan et al., 2012).

As a preface to a forthcoming review of the moratorium by the author, I briefly document the degree to which the moratorium area still erroneously incorporates licensed forests according to official forest-license maps, and fails to transparently account for its own changing extent. This examination reflects broader discussions over the possibility of genuine REDD+ reforms in 'fragile states' characterised by limited control over forest resources and vested, competing agendas amongst its ministries (Burgess et al., 2011; Karsenty and Ongolo, 2012). Even in the presence of political will, bi-lateral REDD+ projects in such states may be characterised by gesture as much as performance (Olbrei and Howes, 2012) and tend towards negotiating complacent rules rather than taking tough measures (Karsenty and Ongolo, 2012: 42). The Indonesian moratorium is arguably a case in point. Its REDD+ Readiness plan is presently undergoing an evaluation, and yet debate remains as to what constitutes a 'successful' moratorium. Is the mere beginning of a process sufficient, in light of the fact that poor forest management was the status quo to address; or should transformative change be the criteria for success? Without dwelling on the question of success per se, here I argue that fulfilment of the REDD+ reforms inherent to the moratorium are noteworthy yet partial, as responsible governmental agencies strive to balance compliance with convenience; that continued efforts are therefore required merely to achieve the originally envisaged outcomes; and that data unavailability has aggravated the partiality of the reforms.

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**Table 1**  
Forest-license area within moratorium area of May 2013.

Forest license	Area (Mha)
Logging	3.04
Wood fibre/timber	0.58
Oil palm	0.86
Coal mining	1.01
Total	5.49

## Methods

I used two complementary methods to examine the extent and transparency of Indonesia's moratorium on new forest licenses. First, I measured the area of spatial overlap between the latest moratorium-area map (Presidential Working Unit, 2013) and the latest available maps of licenses for logging, oil palm, wood-fibre plantation, and coal mining (Greenpeace Indonesia, 2009, 2010; Ministry of Forestry, 2010a,b) using a GIS. Second, I conducted semi-structured, in-depth interviews with eleven senior officials of The Ministry of Forestry, The Presidential Office, The Norwegian Embassy,<sup>1</sup> and the ex-Governor of Aceh Province, as well as 17 senior staff and scientists from major environmental institutes, NGOs, and universities engaged with the moratorium (Greenpeace, CIFOR, University of Indonesia, Union of Concerned Scientists, World Agroforestry Centre, Walhi, Sawit Watch, Forest Watch Indonesia, World Resource Institute, The Nature Conservancy, and BPKEL [Aceh]). Informants collectively comprise many of the major actors and knowledge holders of the moratorium process. Interviews concerned the institutional challenges of designing and implementing the moratorium. They interrogatively explored issues important to the informants, from the various point of view of the informants. Initial questions derived from issues and uncertainties apparent from a review of various government documents, internal memos, NGO and research reports, and the published account of an Indonesian negotiator of the REDD+ programme in question (Purnomo, 2012). The inductive, iterative nature of enquiry, which spanned two rounds of interviews and later incorporated feedback on this article from informants, helps ensure the veracity of the views discussed (Baxter and Eyles, 1997).

## The moratorium, forest licenses, and transparency

The degree to which the moratorium actually protects unlicensed primary forest from licensing is far less than the current moratorium area of 64.67 million hectares (Mha) would suggest. Previous reports observe a 66% overlap between the moratorium area and forests already exempt from licensing (Austin et al., 2012; Murdiyarso et al., 2011), as well as significant overlap between moratorium areas and forests eligible for licensing but passively protected by their remoteness and relative unattractiveness for commercial exploitation (Sloan et al., 2012). The moratorium area ultimately afforded 'additional' protection probably stands between ~12 Mha and ~22 Mha (Murdiyarso et al., 2011: Table 1; Sloan et al., 2012: Table 1), depending on whether 'additionality' is defined as protection from probable threat or more simply as the redesignation of land from eligible to exempt status, respectively. Given this relatively small area, it is noteworthy that the current moratorium area still encompasses 5.49 Mha of forest licenses (Table 1). Licensed areas, including previously licensed areas, are exempt from the moratorium and therefore subject to excisement. Thus, the loss of these 5.49 Mha would constitute a significant

further reduction to the actual 'additional' conservation area of the moratorium.

More significantly, the One Map process sought to consolidate license registries and maps for subsequent rational forest management, and the persistence of these 5.49 Mha after two years and four revisions of the moratorium map raises questions regarding these processes. More significant still is that these questions have no ready answers – the persistence is, in a word, puzzling. The overlap in question is apparent in official data, and the One Map process has previously excised other licensed areas encompassed within earlier moratorium maps. The Ministry of Forestry published spatial data on logging and timber-fibre concessions online in 2010, but has since removed these (except for Google Earth styled visualisation; see note (2)). Some of these overlapping licenses fall within lands now designated for conservation and protection, and it is uncertain whether their retention owes to an apparent decision to retain all such designated forests regardless of whether they are, in fact, the 'primary unlicensed forests' that the moratorium is meant to encompass. Thus, while the One Map process has driven noteworthy gains in data transparency and availability to date,<sup>2</sup> it has not yet attained a level of transparency whereby observers may interpret and scrutinise additions or removals of moratorium area with timeliness or, often, confidence.

The moratorium applies to unlicensed primary forest (where 'primary' implicitly means not historically licensed and exploited), such that by definition transparency and scrutiny require access to maps of forest class and license by permit issued. These maps exist within the Ministry of Forestry and other agencies (e.g., The National Land Agency [BPN]), but they have not been made available (or, in the case of the forest map, they have only been made available in mid 2013, after the original moratorium period expired, and only then in GIS-incompatible formats). My interviews and personal requests confirmed the sensitive nature of these maps and associated databases – particularly those concerning whether a given permit or license had been issued – to the point where the intervention of the Presidential Office was necessary to secure data sharing amongst certain agencies. An official online data portal exists for the purpose of distributing such spatial data more widely,<sup>3</sup> but it remains intermittent at best.

As with the license-area overlap, the 4.46 Mha of moratorium area excised from the moratorium since May 2011 are almost entirely unaccounted for outside of small government circles. A considerable proportion of these 4.46 Mha appears attributable to 'permits-in-principle' issued quickly to preliminary concession applications just prior the moratorium and which grant exemption from its scope (Butler, 2011; Satgas REDD+, 2012a). Concerns exist that the processing of these permits-in-principle is potentially corruptible, particularly as such 'permits' are ambiguously defined and liable to being issued by local authorities in exchange for patronage (Burgess et al., 2011). This lack of transparency is to the alarm of interested observers unable to track the moratorium process in detail. There are at least three reasons why such tracking must occur in the context of the moratorium. First, interested observers of the moratorium process are almost unanimously suspicious of the Ministry of Forestry, given its history of corruption, such that only the utmost of transparency and disclosure is likely to instil confidence and acceptance of the process. Being unable to scrutinise changes to

<sup>1</sup> The Government of Norway negotiated the REDD+ Readiness Programme in question with Indonesia, and provides financial support and oversight.

<sup>2</sup> Three notable examples include: (1) webpages for visualising moratorium maps and downloading GIS-compatible files, <http://www.ukp.go.id/peta-indikatif-penundaan-izin-baru>, [http://www.ukp.go.id/informasi-publik/cat\\_view/20-geospasial](http://www.ukp.go.id/informasi-publik/cat_view/20-geospasial); (2) a webpage for visualising forest-designation and land-cover maps, and downloading Google Earth files (albeit often not GIS-compatible), <http://webgis.dephut.go.id/ditplanjs/index.html>; and (3) an online Forest Licensing Portal to track forest-license applications by stage, <http://lpp.dephut.go.id/home>.

<sup>3</sup> See <http://geoportal.bakosurtanal.go.id/portal>; <http://tanahair.indonesia.go.id>.

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