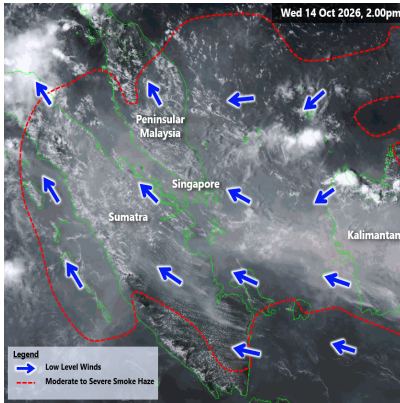




Haze hits Very Unhealthy in the west as Jakarta talks oxygen

Description

Singapore's air turned Very Unhealthy in the west on Wednesday night, and the smoke behind it is coming from fires in Kalimantan and southern Sumatra. At 10pm on 14 October, NEA's [24-hour PSI readings](#) stood at 204 in the west, 184 in the central region, 174 in the east, 161 in the south and 127 in the north. That puts the west in the Very Unhealthy range (201 to 300) for the first time this haze season, with the rest of the island in the Unhealthy range.

The climb was steep. At 5am the west read 146. By 2pm the 1-hour PM2.5 concentration in the west hit 284 $\mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$, crossing into Band 4 (Very High), and it reached 288 at 3pm. By 10pm the hourly readings had eased to 65 to 146 $\mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$, all in Band 2 (Elevated), but the 24-hour PSI, which lags behind, kept rising.

What it means for you

The 24-hour PSI has sat in the Unhealthy range in at least one region since 5 October. Under the MOH health advisory, in the Unhealthy range healthy people should reduce prolonged or strenuous outdoor exertion, while the elderly, pregnant women and children should minimise it, and people with chronic lung or heart disease should avoid it. In the Very Unhealthy range, healthy people should avoid prolonged or strenuous outdoor exertion, and vulnerable groups should minimise or avoid outdoor activity altogether.

NEA's [haze update](#) forecasts the 24-hour PSI for 15 October in the Unhealthy to Very Unhealthy range, with dense smoke expected to keep drifting in overnight on southeasterly winds. Some showers are forecast for Singapore, but dry weather is expected to persist over southern Sumatra and Kalimantan.

The government has started distributing free N95 masks to vulnerable Singaporeans at community clubs and vending machines, and air-conditioned haze shelters are open at community clubs and selected residents' centres. Check go.gov.sg/hazemask for collection points. Use the 1-hour PM2.5 reading for decisions in the next few hours and the 24-hour PSI forecast for tomorrow's plans.

Daily life has already bent around the smoke. At least five running events were called off between 7 and 11 October, and ActiveSG has closed outdoor and non-air-conditioned facilities in several regions.

Where the smoke is coming from

The [ASEAN Specialised Meteorological Centre](#) reported widespread hotspots in Kalimantan and southern Sumatra on 14 October, with moderate to dense transboundary haze over Peninsular Malaysia, Singapore, Kalimantan, Sumatra and western Sarawak. Many air quality stations across the region are reporting Unhealthy to Hazardous levels. ASMC added that thick smoke and cloud hid the full extent of the fires. Alert Level 3, its highest, has been in force for the southern ASEAN region since 26 August.

The outlook is not kind. ASMC expects El Niño and below-normal rainfall to keep the situation escalated, and says inter-monsoon showers towards the end of October could start to bring relief.

Commentary: Oxygen is not an answer

On 10 October, Indonesian outlet Kompas quoted Syahganda Nainggolan, head of Indonesia's government communications agency, as saying: "We're not just sending over the haze. When there's no haze, we send oxygen." He also called the fires "beyond human error; this is truly nature", while saying Jakarta understood its neighbours' concerns and was explaining the measures it was taking. The remarks were [reported by AsiaOne](#).

Start with what is fair. Indonesia's forests are a genuine regional asset, and Indonesians living next to the fires are breathing far worse air than we are. El Niño is real, and dry years make every fire harder to control. Singapore's Minister for Sustainability and the Environment Grace Fu struck the right note on 10 October: "We stand ready to assist where we can."

But the oxygen line does not hold up, and "truly nature" is not the whole story. NEA's own explanation is plain: the haze comes from fires that arise when open burning is used to clear land for agriculture. Drought makes it worse. It does not light the match. Peat that has been drained for plantations burns for weeks, and that is a land management choice, not weather.

We have been here before. In 2015, haze pollution as defined by the Transboundary Haze Pollution Act occurred over four periods from 10 September alone, and Singapore served notices on Indonesian companies. NEA says investigations into four of them remain open more than a decade later. The 2019 season brought the haze back again. Each time, the same promises follow.

Singapore's [Transboundary Haze Pollution Act](#) allows fines of up to S\$100,000 for every day of haze pollution, capped at S\$2 million, on any entity that causes or condones fires that pollute our air, wherever it operates. Since the Act took effect in 2014, no one has been fined. That is less a failure of will than a measure of how hard it is to gather evidence across a border without cooperation.

Indonesia ratified the ASEAN Agreement on Transboundary Haze Pollution in 2014, the last member to do so. The treaty commits parties to prevent and monitor fires, enforce their own laws and share information. Those duties do not lapse in a dry year.

So what would actually help? Publish concession maps so that every hotspot can be traced to a landholder. Prosecute at home, quickly and visibly, the firms whose land burns. Rewet and protect drained peat. Accept offers of firefighting help early rather than late. And for Singapore and Malaysia, keep pressing buyers and financiers here to drop suppliers linked to burning.

Neighbours can disagree about blame and still agree on the fix. Oxygen is welcome. Clean air every year would be better.

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