

Authorities **urge public** to prevent uncontrolled fires

» Open burning threatens health, environment and disrupts businesses: Experts

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PETALING JAYA: As open burning cases surge nationwide, the Fire and Rescue Department has urged the public to take preventive measures to avert an environmental disaster and warned that the consequences can be devastating to air quality and public health.

The department told theSun that last year there was 19,273 cases of open burning recorded, with Sabah accounting for the highest number at 2,415 cases, followed by Johor with 2,142, Kedah 1,971 and Selangor 1,904.

Fire Safety division director Datuk Khirudin Drahman Hussain said the 1997 haze disaster, one of the worst environmental crises in Southeast Asia, serves as a reminder of how uncontrolled forest and bushfires had blanketed the region in smog, making it difficult to breathe and disrupting businesses.

"Fires can be devastating if not controlled, but we can prevent open burning by understanding its risks. The lesson is clear – without prevention, precaution and protection, history will repeat itself."

Khirudin said there was a significant rise in open burning cases last year compared with the same period in 2023, adding that fires in shrublands and grasslands saw the highest increase, from 9,294 cases in 2023 to 13,182 cases in 2024.

He also said waste fires rose from 2,703 to 2,979 cases, while forest fires accounted for 2,164 cases, and farm and plantation fires were at 948 cases.

He attributed the rise to two primary factors: intentional actions and negligence.

"Intentional cases often involve waste disposal, in which individuals or businesses burn waste for quick disposal, particularly in areas with limited waste management. In agriculture, open burning is commonly used to clear land or dispose of crop residues, but this practice severely harms air quality and increases pollution.

"Negligence and lack of awareness also contribute significantly, as many people burn waste without realising the environmental and health risks."

Khirudin said the department is



Open burning cases continue to rise, with Sabah having the highest number, followed by Johor, Kedah and Selangor. – **MASRY CHE ANI/THESUN**

collaborating with agencies such as the Environment Department to monitor air quality and assist in enforcement and firefighting operations. "Additionally, we are partnering with MetMalaysia to receive weather forecasts and data on wind patterns, which are crucial for understanding the spread of fires, especially in the case of forest fires or haze episodes."

Khirudin urged the public to report open burning incidents through the 999 emergency hotline or by contacting the nearest fire station and provide accurate details, adding that the public should never confront offenders directly, but to let authorities handle the enforcement.

Universiti Putra Malaysia faculty of forestry and environment senior lecturer Dr Mohd Yusoff Ishak said pollutants from open burning can cause breathing problems, eye irritation and heart strain in the short term, while long term exposure increases the risk of lung disease, heart disease, cancer and nerve disorders.

"Children, the elderly and those with respiratory conditions are most vulnerable to the effects of open burning. The developing lungs in children make them more prone to asthma and infections, while the elderly, especially those with weakened immune

systems, face higher health risks as smoke can trigger severe breathing difficulties and inflammation."

Mohd Yusoff said encouraging industries, farmers and individuals to stop open burning and adopt environmentally friendly waste management practices requires a mix of incentives, strict regulations, education, supporting infrastructure for circularity and community engagement.

He said Malaysia has strict regulations against open burning under the Environmental Quality Act 1974 and related laws, but enforcement challenges and loopholes allow it to persist.

"There is a need for improvement in personnel and technological resources to monitor remote or illegal open burning and implement mandatory environmental restoration costs for corporate violators or repeat offenders.

"Malaysia can adopt a multi-pronged approach to reduce and eventually stop open burning through composting, upcycling plant materials, bioenergy, investing in Waste-to-Energy technologies and key waste management infrastructure, and improving public engagement to support policy and awareness."