

Indonesia's fish farm expansion to absorb D.C.-sized swath of protected forests

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- This year, Indonesia's government announced the first stage of a five-year plan to expand and intensify aquaculture production on 78,000 hectares (193,000 acres) along the north coast of Java Island.
- The first phase, 20,400 hectares (50,400 acres), will cover four districts in West Java province.
- Civil society leaders in Indonesia point to problematic experiences with similar "strategic" projects administered by the central government, adding that the initial plan in West Java risks further diminishing local fishers' standing, rather than stimulating the community economy.
- A review of zoning documents by Indonesian environment watchdog Walhi showed the initial stage in West Java would include reclassifying 16,078 hectares (39,730 acres) of protected forests for the project — an area nearly the size of Washington, D.C.

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WEST JAVA, Indonesia — A billion-dollar push to [expand fish farming](#) on the island of Java to support Indonesian President Prabowo Subianto's [free school meals program](#) will absorb protected forests nearly the size of Washington, D.C., according to the country's largest environmental group.

"This area would become one of the largest releases of protected forests in West Java in history," said Wahyudi, the West Java provincial director of the Indonesian Forum for the Environment (Walhi).

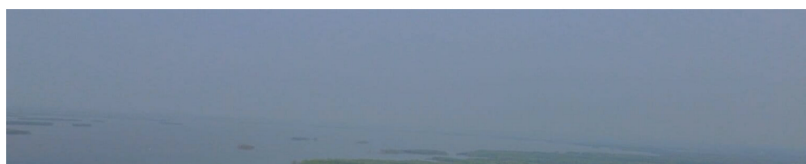
Launched in January, Prabowo's nutrition program is a national drive to reach 83 million people by the end of the president's five-year term in 2029.

In February, the government categorized the planned 78,000-hectares (193,000-acre) aquaculture belt across Java's northern coast as a national priority project. This initial building site will span 20,400 hectares (50,400 acres) across four districts on the West Java coast.

That designation will enable the project managers to speed through some environmental safeguards to expedite the first stage of the \$1.6 billion project to completion by its 2027 deadline.

In June, Mongabay Indonesia spoke with a security guard outside a pond in Sedari village, Karawang district, who said he was unaware of plans to bring the local fish farms under the national priority project framework.

"What will happen to me then?" he said.





Remaining mangrove ecosystems along the coast of West Java province. Photo: Irfan Maulana/Mongabay Indonesia

Indonesia's fisheries ministry projections for the development include the creation of more than 100,000 new jobs. However, Walhi and other environmental civil society organizations say new fish farming estates will do little to strengthen coastal economies battling coastal abrasion and subsidence.

These processes, which are worsened by existing loss of mangrove forests, can lead to displacement and food insecurity. In turn, stresses on livelihoods are well-documented drivers of higher instances of [child marriage](#), [poor educational attainment](#), [water stress](#) and [disease](#).

"Actually what the north coast of Java requires is serious effort to address the impacts of climate change," said Walhi's Wahyudi.

Siti Hannah Alaydrus, advocacy lead for Walhi's West Java office, said the government should audit the status of all protected forest areas with coastal zoning plans in West Java.

Greater commitment to ecologically sound community fish farms, not industrial ponds owned by remote elites, should be prioritized to achieve buy-in from local communities in affected districts of West Java, she added.

Research published in February in the [International Journal of Innovative Research and Scientific Studies](#) concluded that "aquaculture has a strategic role in ensuring food security in Indonesia, especially in coastal areas."

"There has to be the involvement of coastal communities, women and small-scale fish farmers at every stage," Hannah said.



Mangrove forests along the northern coast of Java island serve as critical barriers against storm surges, as well as sources of local food security. Photo: Irfan Maulana/Mongabay Indonesia

Java expansion plan

Multiple studies have shown the expansion of aquaculture has tracked with the deforestation of Indonesia's mangrove forests, accelerating after the 1980s.

Indonesia is home to the world's largest mangrove forest estate, with around 3.3 million hectares (8.2 million acres) of *Rhizophora* and other tree species across coastal and riverine ecosystems. However, up to 40% of these areas faced intensive deforestation for small industries like housebuilding and charcoal production — as well as fish and shrimp farms.

In 2020 then-president Joko Widodo announced ambitious plans to rehabilitate 600,000 hectares (nearly 1.5 million acres) of mangroves by 2024. The total planted area was far below target.

A large share of contemporary fish farms on Java remain reliant on unproductive methods without access to more expensive technology and basic processing of effluence, the absence of which increases common disease of farmed tilapia, such as streptococcosis.

The fisheries ministry says this has created a chasm between potential production and actual output on

The fisheries ministry says this has created a chasm between potential production and actual output on the ground — Indonesia's aquaculture lead hopes the new Java ponds will see productivity rise from 0.6 metric tons per year to 144 tons every year for each hectare.

That dramatic shift could generate annual revenues of 30.7 trillion rupiah (\$1.9 billion) and create 119,000 jobs, according to [the fisheries ministry](#).



Walhi, Indonesia's largest environmental organization, says the expansion of aquaculture production in West Java could involve one of the largest releases of protected forest areas in the province to date. Photo: M. Ambari/Mongabay Indonesia.

Government efforts to significantly expand tilapia and other fish production are also designed to support President Prabowo Subianto's key election pledge to provide free school meals to every child in the world's fourth-most-populous country.

However, intervention in maternal nutrition plus a child's first two years are far more effective in combatting Indonesia's high rate of child stunting, critics note. They say the program's annual \$28 billion cost and focus on school-age children may limit impact in reducing a national rate of child stunting of 21.6% in 2023, according to the Ministry of Health's latest national nutrition survey.

The legal pathway to enable the project was an application by the fisheries to the forestry ministry using the Forest Area for Food Security (KHKP) scheme. Created by then-president Joko Widodo in 2020, the KHKP framework allows state agencies to apply to grow food in protected forests as part of the government's Food Estate program.

Indonesia's forestry minister, Raja Juli Antoni, said in December that his office had identified 20 million hectares (nearly 50 million acres) of forests, an area almost five times the size of Switzerland, that could be converted to grow food (or energy to co-fire the biomass in Indonesia's fleet of coal plants).

Moreover, [Raja has identified 2.9 million hectares](#) (7.2 million acres) of protected forests that could be borrowed to grow food.

Environmental advocacy groups in West Java have responded by calling for cancellation of a forestry ministry decree. No. 274/2025, the legal mechanism enabling the conversion of 16,078 hectares (39,730 acres) of protected forest areas in West Java province, according to Walhi's Wahyudi.

The designation as a national priority project enables the government to fast-track the environmental impact assessment, with less time required for public consultation.

"There has been no process of public consultation or ecological feasibility study for this project," Wahyudi said.

Region vs. center

Environmentalists also say the central government-administered project plan clashes with the zoning plans drawn up under the authority of regional governments, a politically sensitive area that can entail court challenges despite the PSN designation.

West Java's zoning plans would likely afford only 1,175 hectares (2,903 acres) in two districts — not the 20,400 hectares in four districts envisioned by the central government — according to Susan Herawati, who leads the People's Coalition for Fisheries Justice (Kiara), a nonprofit.





West Java's coastal mangrove forests are a lifeline for fishermen who rely on near-shore fisheries. Photo: Irfan Maulana/Mongabay Indonesia

"This means the pond revitalization project does not refer to and is not based on the West Java regional spatial planning regulation," Susan said.

In addition to noncompliance with West Java's zoning plan, which was published in 2022, civil society groups say the project lacks both a strategic environmental assessment (KLHS) and an environmental impact assessment, known as an Amdal.

Susan called the plan to expand industrial production of fish on the north Java coast "not an ecological solution, but rather a systemic threat to the sustainability of the [Java north coast] ecosystem and the lives of coastal communities."

The fisheries ministry did not respond to requests for comment.

This story was first published [here](#) in Indonesian on Aug. 14, 2025.

Banner image: A pond in the Pantura area of West Java that is also used for seaweed cultivation. Photo: M. Ambari/Mongabay Indonesia.

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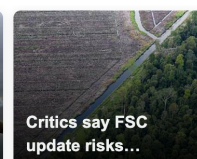


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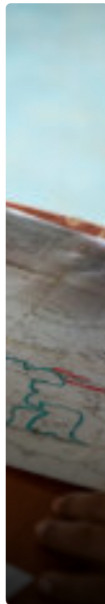
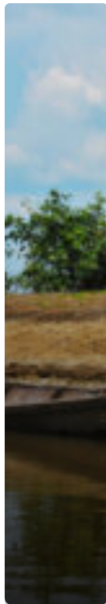
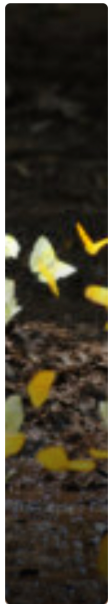
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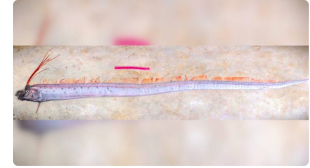
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