

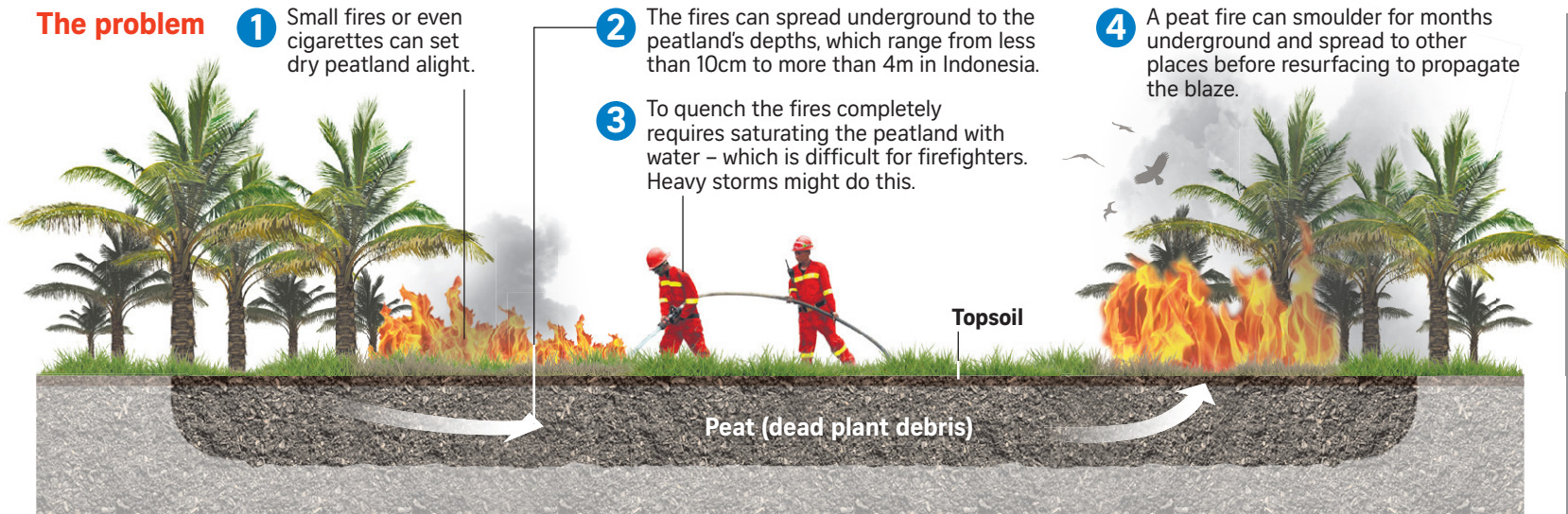
A smouldering problem

Haze from Indonesian forest fires has shrouded Singapore skies for days. Some have identified fires burning on degraded peat lands and idle scrubland in the province of Riau, Sumatra, as the main contributors to the haze affecting Singapore and Malaysia. The Straits Times looks at what a peat fire really is.

What is a peat fire

- Fire that results from peat – partially decomposed plant matter formed in wetlands that is sometimes harvested as fuel.
- Unlike forest fires, it tends to travel underground and can resurface anywhere, making it much harder to combat.
- It is flameless and of a lower temperature than forest fires. It spreads slowly but when the right conditions are met, peat catches fire.

The problem



Causes

- Draining of peat lands for plantation agriculture, causing the deep layers of peat to dry out.
- Clearing land for timber.
- Droughts.
- Burnt areas resume burning.
- Throwing out lit cigarettes, arson and activities such as land-clearing with fire.

Effects

- They produce a lot of smoke and release large amounts of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere.
- They can burn for days and weeks, even under relatively wet conditions.
- Deemed the largest fires on Earth in terms of their carbon footprint.

NOTE: Drawing is not to scale.