

Food production cannot meet population growth

By Johan Aziz

KENINGAU: Food production in the state cannot meet the population growth which is higher than other states, said Agriculture and Food Industry Minister Datuk Seri Panglima Yahya Hussin.

He said land area for food crop production was decreasing and as at end of 2011, the state could only produce 21 per cent of its rice needs.

"We had to import 220,005 tons of rice valued at RM370.6 million," he said in his speech for the opening of the 31st Annual Meeting of the Agriculture Department here on Tuesday.

Yahya added the large allocation provided by the government for rice production to meet at least 60 per cent of domestic demand was a challenge to the Department of Agriculture as a key player in the production of rice.

He said in the Tenth Malaysia Plan (2011-2015) and expected to extend to the Eleventh Malaysia Plan (2015-2020), the rice development program included the implementation of Entry Point Project EPP11, the Kota



Sairin (left) with Ismail launching the Advanced Women Farmers Group and Industry Agro-based Industry Operators Profile Books.

Belud Commercial Rice project undertaken by MAFI as project owner and Kota Belud Farmers Organization as appointed operators to implement the commercial cultivation.

"With the cooperation of all parties, particularly the Department of Agriculture which has the expertise in the cultivation of rice, I am confident the performance will increase rice production from the target five tonnes per hectare to 8.5 tonnes per hectare by 2020.

"Apart from the EPP11 project, I understand that the Department of Agriculture will continue its development programs of the existing rice crops to ensure that the area continues to grow paddy," he said in the speech which was delivered by Assistant Agriculture and Food Industry Minister Datuk Haji Sairin Karno.

Yahya also hoped that the efforts of the department to improve the performance of rice production to 10 tonnes per hectare could be accepted by rice farmers.

He recognized that efforts to increase rice yields to 10 tonnes per hectare required the cooperation of all parties involved, such as the Drainage and Irrigation Department, Department of Agriculture, Farmers Organization and the farmers themselves.

Yahya hopes the EPP 11 Kota Belud Commercial Rice project will be a model for this cooperation and achieve the targets set.

He said one of the ways to achieve rice sufficiency level of the state was to diversify the daily meals according to the food pyramid recommended by nutritionists.

"This means we need to eat more fruits and vegetables. Achievements of our local fruit production in 2011 were 165.439 tons, fulfilling 87.74 per cent of domestic needs.

"This production is more than 80 per cent sufficiency level (SSL) of fruits. In 2011, the state produced 50,318 tons of vegetables that contributed to 56.9 per cent sufficiency level (SSL).

"I understand that the Department of Agriculture had used several strategies in the

production of fruits and vegetables in the state, including the creation of permanent food production parks (TKPM), integrated projects and individual projects focusing on commercial operators," he said.

Yahya said TKPM Tawau was successful in producing vegetables and fruits totalling 780 tonnes, valued at RM1.2 million and hoped that production could be followed by further park projects and operation projects by other departments.

In the government's efforts to achieve food sufficiency in domestic production, he said the goal was not directed to sheer quantity but also to be accompanied by quality.

The Department of Agriculture signed memorandums of understanding (MoUs) with the Malaysia Remote Sensing Agency (ARSM) and Arus Primajaya Company in conjunction with the opening of the meeting.

The MoU with ARSM is to leverage satellite technology for mapping land use in the state. Previously this activity was highly dependent on aerial photography technology.

Through this joint venture, in addition to obtaining land use data more accurately, it can also accelerate land use mapping from six years to three years, besides more structured agricultural developments can be planned better.

The MoU with Arus Primajaya Company will be to conduct collaborative research to assess the suitability and performance of MD2 pineapple variety for commercial cultivation in the state.

Pineapple is 20 per cent of the total production of tropical fruits in the world and these findings can help the development of the pineapple plant to contribute to food production and increase the income of the cultivator.

On the same day was also the launching of the Advanced Women Farmers Group Profile Books and the Agro-based Industry Operators Profile Books which aim to promote women entrepreneurs and farmers under the guidance of the department so that the people can know the products manufactured by them for booking, and for managing joint-ventures.