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A special report

"GREEN" CERTIFICATION, A HELPFUL WAY TO ENHANCE TIMBER EXPORTS

By: Noryani Ismail

KUALA LUMPUR, Dec 14 (Bernama) -- When being "green" or environmentally-friendly began to become a buzzword as far as anything goes beginning this decade, timber producing countries were hard hit with the change in specifications from their export markets which demanded "green timber".

In other words, consumers, being increasingly environmentally conscious, wanted an assurance that the wood products they bought came from forests which are sustainably managed through certification.

The Primary Industries Ministry estimated that local timber industries had lost some 50 percent of exports to important European markets such as the Netherlands, Belgium and the United Kingdom.

The startling figure posted a need for Malaysian timber producers to seriously think of the issue and prepare themselves for certification of their forest management practices and timber.

"Forest management certification is the buzzword in the industry currently," said Forest Research Institute of Malaysia (FRIM) Forestry Division Director Dr S. Appanah at a Forest Management Certification Workshop recently.

The workshop, which aimed to enlighten key players in the industry comprising state forest officers, research institutions and producers on the fairly new issue of certification, was organised by FRIM and Peninsular Malaysia Forestry Department (JPSM).

He said certification is to ensure that logging practices did not cause severe environmental impact such as soil erosion, climate change, rapid loss of species and genetic diversity, including diminishing the livelihood and culture of forest dwellers.

Other tropical timber producers which had started developing certification programmes included Indonesia, Brazil and Ivory Coast.

To be certified, an independent audit company will assess the forest management systems of the forest to ensure that they met the Criteria and Indicators (C & I) of sustainable forest management including passing the mandatory Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA).

Some of the C & I include a good land use plan, rehabilitation for logged forest, replanting, identification of conservation areas, protection of forest dwellers and compliance to labour rights.

Among the internationally recognised independent auditors that certify forest management include SGS Forestry (Malaysia) Sdn Bhd which is currently engaged in pre-certification for Kumpulan Pengurusan Kayu Kayan Trengganu (KPKKT), Certified Kumpulan Guthrie's Syarikat Kayu Manis Rubber Wood Estate in Johor and Scientific Certification Systems (SCS) which had engaged in certification in Canada, Poland, Sweden and Central America.

KPKKT Forestry Manager M. Yusuf Ahmad said his company had decided to start certification of 125,000 ha of its concession to enhance the company's corporate image and win more overseas orders.

JPSM Assistant Director General for Macro and Micro Planning Thang Hooi Chiew pointed out that eventhough forest management certification had only recently been introduced, forests had been sustainably managed in the country even before the term existed.

The logging practices in Sabah and Sarawak are especially very advanced in forest management. Known as "low impact logging" or skyline, the logged timber is carried by cables, a system which significantly reduces soil

damage when compared with tractors.

Sabah and Sarawak also have comprehensive economic development and education programmes for forest dwellers and villagers in their forest concessions.

Nonetheless, there are detractors and some loggers have reservations on the issue of forest certification mainly because of the costs incurred. They have estimated that it cost them at about RM2 a sq metre and this would add to the cost of having the mandatory Environmental Impact Assesment (EIA) for their concessions.

"Personally, I think rather than spending millions to get the forest certified, the money could well be used for implementing more forest management programmes and workers training," said Awang Sham Pulau General Manager for the Yayasan Sabah Group.

But forestry consultant S T Mok takes the long term view. He said industries have to keep in mind that certification is entirely voluntary and market driven while sustainable forest management is mandatory because of the Malaysian government's commitment to the International Tropical Timber Organisation's (ITTO) objectives to have sustainably managed forest by 2000.

Mok, who had worked with the ITTO in establishing C & I for tropical forest management, said producers need not fear being pushed out from the market because of higher prices for certified timber because it has only minimal cost effect.

The cost of finished doors made from certified timber would each cost only 25 sen more than those made from non-certified timber, he disclosed.

For Dr Appanah, no matter what the arguments against or for forest management certification, the "green market pull" is inevitable.

"By not taking initiatives towards it, countries and companies might lose in the lucrative but sensitive markets," he said. -- BERNAMA

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