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Sulaiman-Strategies

GOVT ADOPTS STRATEGIES TO REDUCE FOOD IMPORTS

KUALA LUMPUR, March 11 (Bernama) -- The government will introduce three strategies to reduce the dependence on imported foodstuff, which amounts to over RM11 billion annually, following the economic slowdown.

Agriculture Minister Datuk Amar Dr Sulaiman Daud said today the strategies included increasing production and use of local products and getting alternative supply from cheaper sources for foodstuff that could not be produced locally due to economic or agroclimatic factors.

The third strategy was to review the value of demand and supply for imported agricultural produce and replace them with local produce subject to economic and agroclimatic factors, project viability and type of seasonal produce, he told a news conference, here.

The Cabinet today agreed to adopt the strategies for implementation by all parties nationwide, he said, adding the strategies would also be placed under the National Agriculture Policy which was being drafted.

He said Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad also directed the Agriculture Ministry to continue its efforts to get the public to engage in agriculture to help reduce food imports.

Dr Sulaiman said the strategies were expected to bear fruit in a year and would be implemented through programmes which had been outlined for the short, medium and long terms.

The programmes included expanding the areas for agriculture because so far only 23 per cent of the 5.7 million hectares which could be used for food production were being utilised.

He said the increase would be done according to zones with 10,290ha for vegetables and 29,630ha for aquaculture out of a potential 422,000ha.

Other programmes included encouraging involvement and investment by the private sector under the Fund For Food, enhancing marketing efficiency and transfer of technology, upgrading human resource and infrastructure development and encouraging downstream industries.

Dr Sulaiman said the strategies were expected to reduce the deficit incurred by the food sector which amounted to RM4.71 billion last year. Cereals contributed 48 per cent to the deficit, sugar (16 per cent), and dairy and livestock products and vegetables, the rest.

The strategies would also improve the balance of payments for foodstuff and agricultural inputs which now clearly showed that the country depended heavily on imported stuff, he said.

Last year food exports amounted to RM5.3 billion compared with RM10 billion in imports while RM416.7 million worth of agricultural inputs were exported compared with RM1.42 billion imported.

Last year Malaysia imported RM1.76 billion worth of foodstuff from Australia, Thailand (RM1.43 billion), United States (RM953 million), New Zealand (RM729 million) and India (RM650 million).

The 1990-1997 import trend showed that imports from the United States recorded the highest annual growth rate at 21.1 per cent due to the rise in the use of and demand for livestock products. -- BERNAMA

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