

Move to shake up agriculture industry

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By OUR REPORTER

A NEW body chaired by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad will start work in March to formulate policies and troubleshoot problems in a move towards a shake-up in the agriculture industry.

Datuk Dr Effendi Norwawi, who was made Agriculture Minister after the general elections last November, said the Consultative Council on Agriculture's top priority is to increase private sector participation in agro-based industries.

It will formulate policies, consider incentives and review existing systems and procedures to attract big companies to invest in agriculture.

It also plans to identify and resolve problems faced by companies involved in agriculture, or factors that may be causing some of them to stay away from the industry.

"The council will also monitor the progress in the implementation of the National Agriculture Policy and improve it along the way," Effendi said in Kuala Lumpur yesterday after a signing ceremony between the Malaysian Government

and the International Centre for Living Aquatic Resources Management.

Dr Mahathir is expected to launch the council in March at the National Agriculture Forum.

Effendi said under the council, there will be another coordinating committee where members will

comprise state agriculture executive councillors.

The committee will be the coordinator between the state governments and the council.

In the next five years, the ministry aims to generate more new industries in the agriculture sector with high value products from agri-

culture commodities and natural resources.

It also aims to modernise agriculture for smallholders and fishermen to improve their productivity, income and quality of life.

"In the next few weeks, I will study agriculture's contribution to economic development. I will go to all

agencies, departments and research institutes to get as much information as possible in this process of re-viewing the sector.

"We want to ensure that companies see the agriculture sector as another potential part of economic growth," he said, adding that he intends to show the private sector that investment in agriculture is as profitable and exciting as in other sectors.

Effendi said Malaysia could not undertake modernisation of the agriculture sector unless the private sector was involved.

The Government will develop large-scale commercial agriculture activities that will involve smallholders.

"While we are targeting the big companies, we will not neglect the smallholders in modernising the agriculture sector."

The ministry will also hold discussions with various states to get feedback on how the Federal Government can collaborate and carry out projects which will benefit them.

"The involvement of the state governments is crucial as we need land for agriculture and land is a state matter," he added.