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Food import bill set to decline by 2005: Minister

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THE Government expects to see a major decline in food import bill by the year 2005 following several campaigns and efforts to transform the agriculture sector in the country, said Agriculture Minister Datuk Mohd Effendi Norwawi.

He said the campaigns include one which encourage small-scale farmers to consolidate their efforts as "a group of farmers", to achieve higher farm production.

Mohd Effendi said a pilot project was launched in Kelantan involving 150 farmers, whose combined padi field of 600ha has helped to increase the production yield as well as income for the farmers.

"The problem is not just on the transfer of science and technology. The most important thing is the transfer of minds, from small-scale farmers to new entrepreneurs," he told reporters after the soft launch of FoodPro Asia 2001 in Kuala Lumpur yesterday.

Malaysia's food import bill has been on the increasing trend since 1990. The figure was further escalated following the depreciation of ringgit due to the financial and economic problem which hit the region in 1997.

Last year, the food import bill stood close to RM11 billion and Mohd Effendi said the figure will probably reach some RM12 billion this year.

He said the ministry is currently focussing on certain commodities which could help increase the investments from private sector in agriculture.

"It is about time that we convince the private sector that agriculture is a viable area for business ventures. Companies looking for diversification should look at agriculture as a sector which can give them lucrative returns," he said.

The ministry is expected to hold a dialogue with the private sector on the matter in April 24, which will be chaired by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

The FoodPro Asia 2001, scheduled in August next year, is organised by AMB Exhibitions Sdn Bhd. It is expected to attract 300 exhibitors and over 5,000 delegates and trade visitors to the exhibition and forum.

AMB Exhibitions executive chairman Tan Sri Ahmad Mustaffa Babjee said the event is in line with the Government's effort to make Malaysia into a food exporter in the next five years.

He said the objectives of the events are to provide a regional platform for producers, manufacturers, investors, agencies and regulators to develop strategies and forge partnerships for growth.

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