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Agriculture-Funds (News Focus)

6,000 FISHERMEN GET MASSIVE BOOST FROM ECONOMIC PACKAGE

By: S. Retnanathan

KUALA LUMPUR, May 31 (Bernama) -- The RM7.3 billion economic stimulus package announced by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad last May 21 seeks to boost earnings of some 6,000 fishermen nationwide.

The fishermen would get new boats, nets and freezers to store their catch, paving the way for them to increase their monthly income from RM500 to RM3,000 a month.

The Fisheries Development Authority (LKIM), the government agency entrusted to see to the needs of the local fishermen, feels that the infusion of money into the Fishermen's Fund would help reduce hardship faced by this group.

Agriculture Minister Datuk Effendi Norwawi recently said the Ministry would get the bulk of the economic package, at over RM2.977 billion, and this money would be channelled to 13 government agencies operating under the ministry.

He said RM75 million would be injected to the Fishermen's Fund for the benefit of 6,000 fishermen nationwide.

From these fishermen, it was estimated that 12 tonnes of fish, worth some RM18 million, would be landed monthly.

Effendi said the ministry, under its Infrastructure Fund, would also get about RM17 million to repair 77 jetties and build 27 new ones nationwide.

"The move to upgrade infrastructures for all Area Fishermens' Associations allows them to have better facilities which in turn would benefit 84,000 fishermen nationwide," Effendi told reporters at a Thursday luncheon.

Apart from this a further RM25 million would be utilised by LKIM to build artificial reefs at 124 locations, which should be able to increase fish stocks and boost the catch of some 30,000 traditional fishermen.

Effendi said the stimulus package would also provide RM700 million for the purchase of deep-sea fishing vessels to add to the 740 already in operation.

"These boats use the latest equipment and fishermen can stay longer at sea to improve their catch. Initially, we are going to construct some 200 deep-sea fishing vessels and these boats can bring in 60,000 tonnes of fish a year valued at RM200 million," he said.

The ministry is also seriously looking at disused and abandoned ponds, which had aquaculture potential. It is estimated that there are some 2,600 such ponds scattered throughout the country.

For a start the ministry intends to revive 1,200 ponds, covering 350 hectares of area and involving 500 breeders.

"The cost of rehabilitating these ponds would be RM12.6 million and we expect an income of RM27 million (a year) once these ponds are fully operational," the minister said.

The economic stimulus package had also given the Drainage and Irrigation Department (JPS) some RM150 million for the upgrading of infrastructures at 60,000 hectares of rice-planting land and 700,000 hectares of permanent crop areas.

A total of 190,000 farmers would benefit from this as padi yields are expected to increase from five tonnes to seven tonnes per hectare and a farmer's income would rise from an average of RM750 to RM1,200 a month.

The Veterinary Services Department also stands to benefit from the

economic package. It will get a thumping RM42.7 million to develop the livestock industry and its downstream industries.

The department will focus on the production of beef, poultry meat, milk and animal feed.

A total 173 people would be involved in the commercial rearing of livestock with 64 per cent of them in production of beef, 20 per cent in milk production and six per cent in mutton production.

The department also plans to carry out integrated cattle rearing projects in oil palm and rubber plantations. Each participant would be allocated RM10,000 to buy the livestock and related equipment.

"A total of 1,180 participants can benefit from this project and it will generate an additional RM300 to RM500 a month for each of them," said Effendi.

As for the Farmers' Organisation Authority, it would receive RM57 million to implement projects for 75,400 farmers nationwide.

"Out of these 75,400 farmers, 200 will be encouraged to venture into commercial farming on a large scale.

"Their estimated net income would be RM2,500 a month while RM114 million worth of farm produce is expected from these projects," he said.

If everything fit into plan, the Agriculture Ministry would be a money-spinning agency for the country.

"This RM2.977 billion allocation, if well-utilised, would be able to generate RM5 billion worth of output and benefit 400,000 farmers, fishermen, livestock breeders and smallholders in the country," Effendi said.

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