

15/04/2005

BIOTECH-SWEETENER

M'SIAN BIOTECH FIRM PRODUCES SWEETENERS CHEAPER THAN SUGAR

By: Tengku Noor Shamsiah

PUTRAJAYA, April 15 (Bernama) -- Stevian Biotechnology Sdn Bhd announced today it has succeeded in producing a sweetener whose price is 30 percent cheaper than sugar.

Its director Sushu Singh Sidhu said the sweetener is produced from the stevia plant, known as stevia rebaudiana, a small bush native to Paraguay.

The leaves of this plant contain carbohydrate-based compounds which are 200 to 300 times sweeter than sugar, he added. Traditionally, stevia leaves have been used for hundreds of years in Paraguay and Brazil to sweeten local tea drinks.

According to Sidhu, the price of the sweetener produced is 30 percent cheaper than sugar.

The price of sugar on the international market is now hovering around US\$240 (US\$1=RM3.80) per tonne.

Sidhu, speaking to reporters after a presentation at a biotechnology seminar organised by the Science, Technology and Innovation Ministry here, said his company in its work engaged a Russian scientist who came from a research institute with more than 70 years of research data.

He said Stevian Biotechnology teamed with Russian partners after former Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad had invited them to consider Malaysia as their research and technology (R&D) hub.

The Russians then had been looking for a location in Asia for their R&D work after the break-up of the former Soviet Union.

Sidhu said Stevian Biotechnology has managed to remove the bitter after-taste usually associated with the stevia compounds known as steviosides.

"Our sweeteners which contain zero calories are suitable as sugar substitutes for cooking, baking and beverages," he said.

These sweeteners are also helpful for diabetics and those wishing to reduce sugar intake for health reasons.

According to Sidhu, his company has received good response from major industrial users of sugar locally as well as those in China and India.

China is projected to have a shortfall of one million tonnes of sugar this year as demand may rise to 11.5 million tonnes compared with an estimated supply of 10.5 million tonnes. The shortfall is to be met by imports and government reserves.

Sidhu said Stevian Biotechnology, which is based in Nilai, Negeri Sembilan, would consider producing the sweeteners in overseas locations on a joint venture or licensing basis.

The company, he added, is also considering listing on Bursa Malaysia at the end of this year. -- BERNAMA

TNS SHY LC