

07/08/2004

Kenaf-based sector gets RM12m grant

By OOI TEE CHING

THE Government has, in principle, approved RM12 million as grant under the Ninth Malaysia Plan (2006-2010) for further development of the kenaf-based industry, the National Economic Action Council (NEAC) steering committee chairman Tan Sri Thong Yaw Hong said.

Of the total, RM7 million will go to the research and commercialising of downstream kenaf-based products while the remaining RM5 million is for the research of better-yielding kenaf varieties.

Kenaf is harvested for its fibre and woody core to be processed into, among others, bio-composites like particle boards and fibreboards. It can also be used in the automotive industry.

Thong, speaking to Business Times in Kuala Lumpur, said the Agriculture and Agro-based Industry Ministry is in charge of the kenaf development.

"From this, you can see the synergistic fusion of agriculture and economy," Thong said.

Under the current Eighth Malaysia Plan (2001-2005), RM3.2 million is allocated for kenaf research. A smaller allocation of RM2 million was set aside for the same purpose under the Seventh Malaysia Plan.

"Back in 1999, former Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad envisioned the economic multiplier value in this plant. He then commissioned the NEAC to research the plant, seeing that it can be a renewable fibre source with good commercial potential," Thong said.

The NEAC brings together the Prime Minister, Deputy Prime Minister and the nation's top economic policymakers to strategise economic policies to propel the nation in accelerated momentum to achieve developed-country status.

"The same enthusiasm is seen in our current Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, who chairs NEAC," he said.

The NEAC, he said, is greatly encouraged by the initiative undertaken two years ago by the Pahang State Government's investment arm for agriculture projects, Lembaga Kemajuan Perusahaan Pertanian, to cultivate kenaf on a 6ha plot at Ulu Lepar near Kuantan.

He stressed the need to generate awareness among farmers, especially tobacco and padi planters, that kenaf can serve as additional income if they practise rotational cropping. "When it is the fallow period for padi and tobacco, the idle land can be planted with kenaf.

"With the Malaysian Palm Oil Board and Malaysian Rubber Board within the NEAC working committee, kenaf inter-cropping with other commodities will also be a reality soon," Thong said.

Meanwhile, Dr Jalaluddin Harun, who is the Kenaf Technical Group coordinator, said a few car parts manufacturers have approached the group, through Small Medium Industries Development Corp, to explore the prospects of using kenaf.

Among the companies said to be in talks with the group is interior car parts manufacturer UMW Holdings Bhd.

Kenaf can be made into bio-composites used in door trimmings and interior shelvings of vehicles because its fibre are strong and yet lightweight.

"It is very encouraging to see the private sector showing keen interest to invest in kenaf-based industry," said Dr Jalaluddin, who is also the head of bio-engineering laboratory in the Institute of Advanced Technology, Universiti Putra Malaysia.

Using natural fibres such as kenaf to reinforce polypropylene-based composites also make automotive parts easier to recycle, a feature in high demand in both European and North American markets.

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