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## Biggest farming project commences operations

Sim Bak Heng

JOHOR BARU, Sat. - Malaysia's biggest commercial farming project, covering 4,000ha in Air Hitam, Johor, has commenced operations.

The Premier Agriculture Programme is the brainchild of former Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad, based on an agriculture master plan prepared by the Royal Agricultural College in the United Kingdom.

Johor Menteri Besar Datuk Abdul Ghani Othman pushed hard to make the plan a reality.

The project, involving 20 major companies with investments totalling RM100 million, is designed to transform Air Hitam into the country's biggest commercial food zone.

The companies will be involved in mixed food production and livestock rearing. Eleven of them are Johor-based, while the rest are from other parts of the country.

Among the companies are Lazuli Sdn Bhd, Corak Mas Sdn Bhd, Xian Leng Holdings and Herbal Bagus Enterprise.

State Agriculture and Rural Development Committee chairman Othman Jais said four of them were engaged in livestock breeding, with the farms commencing operations at Padang Hijau in Kahang in September.

The other companies are involved in aquaculture and vegetable and fruit farming. These farms are due to start operations early next year.

"This is because the infrastructure such as roads, water and electricity supply for fishery, vegetable and fruit farming are not ready," he said.

Othman said the companies were chosen based on their track records in agriculture and their ability to inject funds to develop the farms.

"Over the next five years, these companies will invest in farm technology and equipment to convert the farms into large-scale commercial farms for the production of vegetables, fruit, herbs and spice, as well as fish and livestock breeding.

"The idea is to make Malaysia self-sufficient in farm produce to reduce our dependence on imports, which also means lower cost for consumers," he said.

Othman said of the 4,000ha, vegetable and fruit farming would take up 2,400ha, while 1,200ha and 400ha had been set aside for livestock breeding and fisheries development respectively.

Of the total land area, the Johor Government has agreed to transfer 1,900ha to the Federal Government as part of the plan to woo "big players" to the project.

The mega project also includes a tourism component called World Farming Village. The tourism village will, among others, have hotel and recreational areas.