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Malaysia's Best assurance of quality

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IMAGINE the most mouth-watering pineapples, juiciest watermelons and most succulent mangoes. All perfectly shaped and of superior quality, with no spots, bumps and deformities. Just look for the Malaysia's Best logo, says the Agriculture Ministry.

Along with the starfruit and papaya, the very best of these fruits are available to the public under the Malaysias Best seal, which guarantees high standards of quality and food safety. The first batch of produce under the seal was shown last month by Agriculture Minister Datuk Effendi Norwawi, who said the five fruits were selected to spearhead the programme because of their popularity and high demand.

Designed to facilitate the promotion of Malaysia's agriculture produce in domestic and international market, the seal will eventually cover all agriculture produce as well as fisheries and livestock.

He said the seal was dependent on the accreditation carried out by the Farm Accreditation Scheme (SALM), which ensures farms implemented Good Agriculture Practices in producing safe and high-quality produce.

"All the high-international standards are incorporated in our accreditation programme. The Malaysia's Best logo aims to brand the country's best products, making it our master brand," he said during the soft launch of the seal.

The seal is expected to be officially launched in next few months by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

He also said the programme would encourage farmers to produce high-quality and safe agriculture produce that would be able to compete in local and international markets.

Malaysian farmers will be able to command a premium on their agriculture produce, and improve their standards of living. Consumers, at the same time, can be assured of the quality and safety of the produce they were buying, he said.

The scheme makes it a must for farms to comply with international standards of the GAP, which is an environment-friendly farm management method, based on approved international agriculture standards such as the EUREP GAP and Codex-International Code of Practice and the Malaysian Standard.

He said in the next few months, the Malaysias Best produce would be rolled out to 30 outlets nationwide, with Tesco Stores the first retailer to supply the produce.

Malaysias Best produce will be placed prominently on gondolas in each store. They are now available at Tesco outlets in Kuala Lumpur, and soon in Puchong and Malacca as well as Carrefour, Sunshine, Tanjung Supermarket and Fajar Supermarket outlets in Penang.

He said so far 400 farms were registered with the Federal Agriculture Marketing Authority (Fama), the sole issuer of the Malaysias Best seal, and were undergoing various stages of accreditation. Forty-seven farms have been accredited.

The seal, which is placed on all Malaysias Best produce, is registered with the Registrar of Trademark and has security features incorporated to prevent forgery.

The produce coming out of the accredited farm has to be graded, packed and labelled according to standard specifications as laid down by Fama before being marketed.

The assessment of farms will be based on farm records, soil and substrate management, crop-protection management, harvesting system, post-harvesting practices, worker safety and security, water management and grading, packaging and labelling.

Emphasis is also being placed on environmental management, such as the use of pesticides and chemicals storage.

A massive campaign to promote Malaysias Best is also being undertaken by the ministry through educating farmers, retailers, wholesalers and exporters, and conducting regular consultations, seminars and training courses for them.

The ministry, with advertising firm Leo Burnett, is also launching a Malaysia's Best nationwide advertising campaign to promote the logo as a symbol of quality and safety.

One of the issues Effendi stressed during the soft launch of the five fruits was the importance of maintaining the seal's credibility.

To ensure the accredited farms maintain quality, surveillance on them will be conducted through visits and product sampling at farm and point of sale at least once in six months.

Non-compliance will result in farms being suspended, although the ministry will give out advice and allow time for them to solve whatever problems they have.

Another follow up inspection will be conducted after the time frame expires and three samples will be taken for analysis of pesticide residual levels, heavy metal and microbial contaminants.

If the problems persist, the farm will then be withdrawn from the accredited list and will have to submit a reapplication if they want to rejoin the programme.

To provide as much information as possible, the ministry has produced many leaflets and booklets detailing the Malaysia's Best programme, as well as including a substantial portion to it on its website and its Business Development Centre.

In the many booklets on Malaysia's Best fruits, information is given on each fruit, such as the standard specifications and grading which applies, proper harvesting methods, ways to handle the fruit, packaging and storage.

The scope for the standard specifications and grading consists of various indexes according to the colour of the fruit, for example, three indexes for watermelon, six indexes for papaya and mango and seven indexes for pineapple and starfruit.

Effendi said the seal would ultimately take Malaysia's agriculture sector to greater heights.

"In the past, Malaysia was just selling fruits but now we are going to sell our brand."