

Agricultural bio-technology powerful tool to reduce food imports

TBP 30.11.2006 P. 3

KOTA KINABALU: Agricultural bio-technology is a powerful tool in bringing down food imports and improving self-sufficiency in food production in Malaysia, said Universiti Malaysia Sabah (UMS) vice-chancellor Professor Datuk Mohd Noh Dalimin.

He said the country's agriculture and food industry sectors have suffered relatively sluggish growth, resulting in growing food imports and food insecurity.

"In 2001, Malaysia's food imports totalled US\$3.2 billion. A high import bill of 21.3 per cent was recorded in 2004 compared to the lower rate of 17.5 per cent for export goods," he said in his speech at the opening ceremony of the Biotechnology Symposium II 2006 at UMS here yesterday.

"The field of molecular biology makes it possible to transfer useful traits from one organism, for example plants and food crops, to another.

"This allows them to confer better traits or characteristics such as higher yielding crops and livestock and increased tolerance towards unfavourable environmental conditions and pests which affect growth and productivity," he said.

Mohd Noh noted that despite controversies surrounding genetically-modified (GM) food, genetically-engineered organisms such as maize, soy bean and tomatoes have enjoyed significant increase in productivity which in turn leads to proportionate increase in income per hectare.

The symposium's organising chairperson, Professor Datin Dr Ann Anton of UMS' Biotechnology Research Institute, added that agricultural biotechnology research is an overall innovation system involving goal-oriented interactions between the Government, industry and universities.

"Modern biotechnology such as the utilisation of molecular biology, can enhance the competitiveness of agricultural products and thereby promoting their integration into the global economy.

"Efforts to diversify agricultural production will not only promote food security but will also add new crops to the world food market," she said.

Some 79 participants are attending the three-day symposium, which was officially opened by Agriculture and Food Industry Minister Datuk Abdul Rahim Ismail yesterday. Aside from six plenary lectures, there will also be 22 oral presentations and 20 poster presentations over the symposium which ends tomorrow (Friday).

Among the speakers and participants are scientists from Australia, Thailand, the United States and Malaysia apart from 17 scientists from the Korean Research Institute for Bioscience and Biotechnology and officials from the Korean Ministry of Science and Technology.