UMS venturing into seaweed business

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KOTA KINABALU: Universiti Malaysia Sabah (UMS) is venturing into the seaweed business with hopes of spurring the nation's economy through the potentially billion ringgit industry.

Currently worth RM420 million in Malaysia, the seaweed industry is expected to involve 1,500 families by 2020 with RM1.45 billion in export value, according to UMS' Seaweed Research Unit.

Coupled with award winning research and development from UMS, the university's Seaweed Research Unit chief, Prof. Madya Dr Suhaimi Md Yasir, said he is confident the industry will take off in Malaysia.

He said that new culturing techniques and funds from various government agencies and the private sector would help boost production and commercialisation of the algae.

Dr Suhaimi, who is also a senior lecturer at UMS' School of Science and Technology, was speaking to reporters at the Seminar on Issues and Challenges in the Seaweed Industry in Sabah at UMS, here, Wednesday.

Among the awards secured by Dr Suhaimi's team were gold medals and highest awards in the International Trade Fair Ideas in Germany for 2011 and 2012, Malaysia Technology Expo in 2012 and the International Invention, Innovation and Technology Expo in 2010.

To launch this effort, UMS is setting up a 28,000-hectare mini estate system in Semporna that is targeting to produce about 500 to 800 metric tonnes of seaweed a month starting next year.

Their current mini estate, which is also in Semporna, produces about 250 metric tonnes of seaweed a month.

Other estates in the State are located in Kudat with 500 hectares, Lahad Datu with 5,000 hectares and Kunak with 5,000 hectares.

UMS is also planning on opening up other estates in Langkawi, Kedah, Perak and Selangor in due time.

But the UMS' attempt to penetrate the industry in a big way would come with several challenges, said Dr Suhaimi.

Among them, he said, are obtaining land gerunds, finding workers, price control and product quality assurance.

He added that internationally, seaweed has also been receiving mixed response on several issues, especially its toxicity levels.

But this, said Dr Suhaimi, is something the Research and Development unit has been working to solve.

Listed on Malaysia's top three agricultural production alongside herbs and bird's nest, seaweed is used in various products such as cosmetics, meat, dairy, confectionery and toothpaste.

But the nation faces steep competition from top producers of the algae, Indonesia and Philippines, with 17,000 and 34,500 metric tonnes produced respectively in 2009. Malaysia produced 1,700 metric tonnes the same year.