UMS develops safe seaweed following concerns in US

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By Jenne Lajim

KOTA KINABALU: The seaweed industry in Malaysia, Philippines and Indonesia are now facing a marketing challenge following the US government's decision to stop the use of seaweed in its products.

According to Professor Madya Dr Suhaimi Md Yasir, UMS seaweed research unit director, the US government has given several reasons for the decision.

"The first reason is that seaweed is invasive to coral, the second is its toxicity and the third is that due to the methods used during the drying process, it can become carcinogenic, particularly for babies," he said.

He added that the study on seaweed being carcinogenic was carried out by Harvard University and explained that the reason seaweed become carcinogenic was when they were exposed to ultra violet (UV) and infra red (IR) rays.

"That is why UMS came up with the 'sauna first and then dry concept' to address the health issue," he said.

Shahril (centre) receiving a memento from the Ethnography and Development Research Unit head, Professor Madya Dr Rosazman Hussin at the event yesterday.

In the context of Malaysia, the main challenge facing the industry has been the lack of space, he said.

"Which is why we have innovated the high density planting system, which will allow us to produce between 500 and 800 kilograms of seaweed per hectare of area, the system is still being studied at Pulau Sebangkat, and we expect the new technology to be available early next year," he said.

On the product and marketing side, he shared that UMS has launched over 20 commercial products last week during the Product and Marketing Development seminar held at Shah Alam. He added that they were able to secure RM3 million in sales during the event. In the near future, similar seminars will be held in Penang, Johor and in Kuching.

Meanwhile, UMS has been entrusted by the government to develop the seaweed industry and turn it into an export commodity capable of generating growth in the country's Gross Domestic Product (GDP).

It is also hoped that UMS would be able to help improve the income of the local community as well as that of the country, said UMS vice Chancellor, Professor Datuk Dr Harun Abdullah, during the 'Issues and Challenges in the Sea Weed Industry in Sabah' seminar held at Auditorium Yayasan UMS near here yesterday.

Dr Harun, who was represented by UMS deputy vice chancellor, Professor Dr Shahril Yusof, said that in this respect, UMS was directly involved with the country's seaweed industry development agenda, and in particular, the field of research and innovation of the seaweed industry.

He added that the development of the seaweed mini estate headed by UMS since 2010 up until now and in the future contained two phases that were implemented concurrently.

The two phases comprise the 'Development Implementation Phase (2011–2020) and the 'Product and Marketing Development Implementation Phase' (2013–2020).

The development implementation phase focuses on the development of infrastructure and the management of the mini estates, which also includes the appointment of major leading companies as well as to identify suitable seaweed culture locations, particularly in Semporna, Sabah.

The product and marketing development implementation phase, on the other hand, focuses on the development of seaweed as a product and its marketing and promotion efforts. Seaweed-based products are used in the food industry, health industry, pharmaceutical, horticulture and bio-fuels.

"As a guarantee that both these phases are attained successfully, we need to identify the current issues and challenges that would deter us from reaching the objectives," he said.

He also urged UMS researchers, who were involved in the seaweed industry, to find new and effective seaweed management techniques, address marketing issues (if any) and produce new products that are commercial-oriented so that these would be able to generate income and produce successful seaweed entrepreneurs.