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Soils 2011 Conference

Investments in forest plantations growing

By Chok Sim Yee

KOTA KINABALU: Investments in forest plantations, relatively low in Malaysia, have recently grown in importance.

Dr Wan Rasidah Wan Abd Kadir of the Forest Research Institute of Malaysia (FRIM) said private investments in forest plantations with fast growing tree species had risen in view of the growing demand for housing and furniture grade timbers, of which, rubber, acacias and teak being the most valued.

"Forest-based industries in the country have recognised that the existing natural forests cannot continue to meet their demand for timber and are expected to play a significant role in increasing investments in plantation programmes in the coming years."

Statistics in 2009 showed that the extent of forest plantations in the country are Sarawak (238,642 hectares), Sabah (125,000 hectares) and Peninsular Malaysia (75,672 hectares). Wan Rasidah said this when delivering her keynote address on forest plantation and the environment at the Soils 2011 Conference organised by

Universiti Malaysia Sabah (UMS) in collaboration with the Malaysian Society of Soil Science (MSSS) as well as the Department of Agriculture and the Forestry Department here yesterday.

She continued that the Malaysian timber industry was a major export earner for the nation, providing job opportunities, state government revenues and foreign exchange earnings.

The data showed that the industry had employed more than 123,000 workers in 2007, and contributed an estimated RM23.44 billion in revenue in 2006.

However, the recent economic downturn had caused exports to drop by 14.5 per cent from RM22.8 billion in 2008 to RM19.49 billion in 2009.

Efforts to ensure continuous supply of raw materials for the domestic timber industry has led to an allocation of RM1 billion from the Ministry of Plantation Industries and Commodity for a 15-year replanting programme through the Malaysian Timber Industry Board (MTIB) to develop 375,000 hectares of forest plantation at an annual planting rate of 25,000 hectares by the year 2020.

"Once implemented, every 25,000 hectares of land planted is expected to produce five million cubic metres of timber.

"In addition, Malaysia had aimed to achieve timber export earnings of RM53 billion per year by 2020 by ensuring the industry's growth at an average of 6.4 per cent a year," she added.

Furthermore, Wan Rasidah said commercial forest plantations had been established in Sabah since 2004 with an allocated area of 545,000 hectares.

"To date, more than 125,000 hectares have been established with the species planted such as Acacia mangium, Paraserianthes falcataria, Eucalyptus grandis, Eucalyptus deglupta, Eucalyptus pellita and Neolamarckia cadamba."

Wan Rasidah however pointed out that the majority of forest plantations in Malaysia were established on non-fertile soils.

She explained that fertiliser was only applied to boost initial tree growth but was not a major input in forest plantations as the long gestation period required minimal planting costs.