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Call to plant 'sungkai' trees for Sabah's future timber stock

By Murib Morpi

KOTA KINABALU: Oil palm planters have been urged to grow 'sungkai', an imported tree species from Indonesia, to help build Sabah's future timber stock.

Assistant Tourism, Culture and Environment Minister Datuk Sairin Karno, in making the call, said that Sungkai or *Peronema canescens* can be planted among oil palm trees to maximize land usage and increase revenue.

He said oil palm operations in Sabah are generally monoculture in nature and with 1.5 million hectares of total plantations area, the potential for the industry to lead in agroforestry, specifically the cultivation of Sungkai trees, is huge.

"Apart from the economic value, the planting of Sungkai trees also has ecological benefits for the environment. This is also in line with the National Agriculture Policy which promotes optimal use of land to increase productivity while at the same time protect the environment," he said.

Speaking at the inaugural National Seminar on Sungkai Research and Development 2015 held at Universiti Malaysia Sabah (UMS) yesterday, Sairin said *Peronema canescens* could provide good raw material that would sustain continuous growth in the timber and timber-related industry.

Agroforestry, he noted, is not entirely new to Sabah, where another foreign species, *Acacia*, had been introduced in the early 80s as raw material for paper, sawn timber, furniture and plywood, which was on the rise due to strong global demand.

However, over dependency on one species could be risky as a single widespread disease or pesticide attack may put an end to the whole industry. As such, he said finding and establishing a new species to sustain the local agroforestry is an urgent need, and the oil palm sector, which is the



Datuk Sairin Karno (right) flanked by UMS Faculty of Science and Natural Resources Dean Professor Dr Baba Musta (left) visiting one of the exhibitions yesterday.

biggest agricultural segment in Sabah, could help achieve this objective.

"Preliminary research showed that Sungkai wood is light and very suitable for making furniture, especially for markets in developed countries where consumers often live in high-rise buildings. They need lighter furniture which are easier to carry up to their homes.

"This species is also found to be suitable for making high quality musical instruments and sport equipment. I was also informed that the growth rate of the tree is quite fast, reaching up to 30cm in diameter in just 13 years. The timber is also white in colour, which is preferred by the Japanese and Koreans," he said.

Sungkai is an endemic species to Borneo that grows in abundance in Kalimantan. It was first brought in to Sabah in the year 2000, and a few pioneering companies started planting the species in small numbers.

These first batches of trees have now grown to quite a size and enable local researchers and interested parties to take a closer look

at how the species grow and affect the environment.

Sairin also informed that a joint research committee had been set up by UMS, Malaysian Timber Industry Board (MTIB), Forest Research Institute of Malaysia (FRIM) and Sabahpuri Nursery to conduct related studies on the species and to introduce the Sungkai to local players.

Meanwhile, seminar chairman, Professor Dr Mohd Hamami, said the seminar provides a platform for stakeholders to share knowledge and latest information on Sungkai planting, towards formulating a plan to harness the potential of the species for future development of agroforestry and related industries.

He said available information on this particular tree was still very limited and mostly made available by researchers from Indonesia.

The two-day seminar which will resume today, is jointly organized by the Faculty of Science and Natural Resource of UMS, FRIM, MTIB and Sabahpuri.