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Malaysia leads green agenda

At Your Service by DATUK WIRA ISMAIL SALEH

Our readiness to reduce carbon emissions by 40% shows our seriousness in combating climate change.

MUCH has been said about the recently concluded UN Climate Change Conference.

The two week-long "carnival" in Copenhagen ended with a bare minimum agreement, falling short of the original goals. Prolonged negotiations failed over differences on "common but differentiated commitments".

Only the United States, China, India, Brazil and Malaysia announced a non-binding statement of intent.

Almost all countries participating in the conference indicated that they would "take note" of the so-called Copenhagen Accord.

Our readiness to reduce carbon emissions from 187 million tonnes in 2005 to 74.8 million tonnes in 2020 – a 40% cut – showcases our seriousness in combating the climate change issue, which is closely associated with palm oil and timber-related issues.

This voluntary pledge will silence critics who have often adversely commented on how Malaysia has handled its commodity sector, particularly palm oil, rubber, timber, cocoa, pepper and tobacco.

Despite the criticisms, our commodity sector had recorded commendable export performance in 2008.

This sector contributed 16.94% (RM112.43bil) to total exports in the same year (RM663.51bil).

As far as green efforts are concerned, the palm oil industry has already embarked on initiatives to reduce carbon emissions. This is done through initiatives that trap biogas, which includes methane, to be used to generate electricity by fuelling steam turbines.

Methane has 21 times global warming potential compared to carbon dioxide. Its use for power generation will further reflect the environmental friendliness of the palm oil industry as well as reduce the impact towards global warming.

Methane is generated from the biological breakdown of empty fruit bunches (biomass) and other organic matters such as manure, sewage and domestic waste.

Methane and other gases emitted from this process are called biogas. Amongst all the biogases, methane is the most potent greenhouse gas which has high potential to cause global warming.

But these processes have had their challenges. The distance of the mills to the national grid has resulted in poor connectivity of electricity, where only 18 out of 417 mills are equipped with methane trapping devices.

The other stumbling block is the high cost of installing methane trapping devices and steam turbine generators, estimated at between RM4mil and RM6mil.

This explains why 96% of the mills are still without the methane trapping facilities.

A concerted effort is needed to ensure Malaysia will be able to deliver our commitment of 40% carbon reduction by 2020.

Some portions of the RM1.5bil Green Technology Fund could be channelled for the development of methane trapping activities.

This is in line with the Natural Resources and Environment Ministry's plan to cut 50 million tonnes of carbon dioxide equivalent per annum with 20% to be contributed by energy efficiency projects and renewable energy sources. Methane trapping falls under this category.

In addition, research is being undertaken to promote the use of waste in the form of biomass into possible growth areas in line with the policy on "creation of wealth from waste".

These include the use of fibre from oil palm trunks and fronds for the production of medium density particle board and bio-composite.

The development of second generation biofuel using biomass as a feedstock holds much potential given that 30 million tonnes of palm oil biomass annually is available for utilisation.

This is also in tandem with the National Green Technology Policy launched by the Prime Minister on July 24 last year.

The policy outlines the framework for the development of environmentally friendly and sustainable forms of energy, in addition to promotion of this sector as a new growth area.

Given the security of fossil fuels globally, the switch to an alternative form of energy is inevitable.

Renewable energy is not limited to source of production. Even though initial investments in renewable energy power plants require a significant amount of capital, companies can mitigate this through multiple business model strategies which allow for growth without excessive demands on capital resources.

This is an area Malaysia must focus much of its public and private sector brains and resources on.

Intensive efforts are being pursued to ensure the midstream rubber industry achieves a green industry status through adoption of more environment-friendly processing technologies, especially in minimising waste discharge and an enhanced sludge treatment to overcome malicious odour (malodour).

The adoption of these kinds of technologies will further boost the environment-friendliness of the rubber downstream industry.

Perennial tree crops are known to function as natural "sponges" for absorbing carbon from the atmosphere.

Rubber trees being a perennial tree crop is one of the most efficient species that can function as efficiently as forest trees in carbon sequestration.

The economic potential for soil and plant carbon sequestration and trading based on the cultivation of rubber plantations is beneficial to the country when the planting of rubber trees is carried out in line with the Clean Development Mechanism (CDM).

The Plantation Industries and Commodities Ministry is exploring this avenue aimed at obtaining optimum benefits for the nation, especially when Malaysia's emission reduction potential could be further enhanced if sequestered carbon by rubber plantations is taken into account.

As a major producer of commodity products, Malaysia will continue to ensure green and sustainable practices continue to be an important pillar in its development.

The development of the commodity sector will be guided along the lines of international sustainable practices.

In the longer term, this will ensure the supply of commodity-related products for food and non-food purposes are sustainable and environmentally friendly.