

Seaweed farmers look beyond Sabah market

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BP 11-03-2012 18

SABAH is the only producer of seaweeds in Malaysia. In 2010, the state produced RM62.35 million worth of dried seaweed. Total production of these commodities has increased by almost 50 percent in 2010 compared to 2009 and continued to increase in value of production.

For the year 2011, production of dried seaweed increased by 15% to 23.94 thousand tonnes valued at RM66.2 million. At present 97% of total seaweed production is managed by the farmers of the district of Semporna, while the rest are in Lahad Datu, Kunak, Banggi and Tawau.

One of the more prolific producers of seaweeds is VC United Sdn. Bhd, which is headed by Azizul Sanarul. Its farm is within a 500-acre sea area in Singgahmata Mini Estate Semporna.

According to Azizul, the seaweeds cultivated by his farm are tambalang, Aring-Aring and crocodile among others. These are from the *Kappaphycus* and *Euचेuma* species.

The company has now been operating for a year in this species, with harvesting held in every 45 days.

On how to start the farm, he says,



Azizul (second right) with company members Amdan Ahmad (right), Chin Hen Lew (second left) and Annie Chin.

using the long line; the rope should be about 300 feet long. The seaweed cuttings are placed every six inches away from each other. These cuttings should not exceed 100 gram for every tie and not more than 100 kilos for the 300 feet long rope.

The length of rope is then placed on the sea in straight lines, buoyed by floaters. The floater enable the farmers to see where the weeds are.

After 45 days the seaweeds are harvested with a comb-like cutter which snips off most of the sea weeds but leave the stalks to grow back.

Each harvest yield about three

tons per block. A 500 acre farm is divided to several blocks with each block allowed to grow for 45 days while the rest are being harvested in steps.

When they are harvested they will then be dried and sold.

Azizul says presently there is only one local buyer in Semporna and they don't have a standard price for the commodities. The prices depend on the market and if there are more seaweeds, the price can drop accordingly. Presently, the seaweeds are going for RM2.50 per kilo.

He says it should go up to at least



Some of the seaweeds harvested in Semporna.

RM5.

The Semporna seaweed farmers are currently looking for international markets and hope that Japan and China may be interested soon.

Azizul says they are also carrying out an integrated marine aquaculture concept where they will also have abalone, fish and sea cucumber to tend and harvest when necessary. This will ensure complementary income as well as for self-consumption while waiting for the seaweeds to mature.

To ensure better yield and seaweed knowledge among farmers, a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) was signed between University Malaysia Sabah (UMS) with eleven of the leaders of the three initial projects under the key economic areas for agro-food sector.

According to the Minister of Agriculture and Food Industry Datuk Yahya Hussin, the gross national income target for the seaweed industry in 2020 is estimated at RM1.4 billion. To achieve this, the government has detailed an Entry Point Project (EPP) in the ETP (Economy Transformation Program) specifically for the development of country's seaweed industry.

In line with this economic transformation program, the

government has taken several strategic steps to transform seaweed industry to commercial-scale business and have higher returns.

These steps involve the preparation of new farming areas in industrial zones implemented by the Department of Fisheries. Not less than 43 thousand hectares of territorial waters involving the main producing areas in Semporna, Lahad Datu and Tawau Kunak have been identified to have high potential to be developed as a seaweed crop area until 2020.

"I was also informed that two other seaweed development programmes will be introduced by the Department of Fisheries Malaysia and Fisheries Department Co-operation of the Commercial Scale Cultivation Project and Program, to upgrade existing farmers through the implementation of cluster development. The Sabah government in general and in particular my ministry expects that this project will continue to give big impact to the State Economy and the State and can help improve the lives of farmers and fishermen who are directly involved in seaweed farming."

On that note Azizul and his counterparts can expect to have better income and better life in future.