

Malaysia's food security at risk

Report shows low self-sufficiency levels for key produce

By SHYAFIQ DZULKIFLI
newsdesk@thestar.com.my

PETALING JAYA: Malaysia's food security goals are falling short, with data showing the country remains heavily dependent on imports for key produce like beef, mutton, cabbage and chilli.

Latest data from the 2024 Agriculture Census Interim Report showed that the self-sufficiency level (SSL) for cattle and buffalo meat stood at just 15.9% in 2023, far below the 35.5% projected under the National Agrofood Policy 2.0 (DAN 2.0) and well short of its 50% target by this year.

This is due to small-scale cattle operations and a lack of local breeding stock, said Universiti Putra Malaysia's Agriculture Faculty dean Prof Dr Loh Teck Chwen.

"Malaysia currently lacks suffi-

cient breeders and parent stock for cattle, which is why we continue to import beef to meet domestic demand.

"This dependence on imported beef drives up prices. Beef now costs around RM35 per kilogram, which is increasingly unaffordable for many households."

Loh said the livestock sector faces multiple structural constraints, including the rising cost of imported feed such as corn and soy, limited land availability and labour shortages.

Agricultural economist Prof Datuk Dr Mad Nasir Shamsudin said despite attempts to integrate livestock rearing in oil palm plantations, uptake from estate operators remains weak.

"We have about nine million hectares of oil palm and there is a huge potential to integrate livestock rearing under oil palm plantations.

"But response from plantation

owners hasn't been encouraging."

Other livestock categories show similar under-performance.

The SSL for sheep and goat meat remained stagnant at 10.6% in 2023, from 10.9% in 2018.

The report also highlighted shortfalls in some vegetable production like round cabbage and chilli, falling below the 50% SSL threshold, although both have shown improvement over the years.

The self-sufficiency level for round cabbage increased to 41% in 2023, up from 38.7% in 2018.

Chilli rose to 37.1% from 31.9% over the same period, indicating that nearly two-thirds of local demand still relies on imports.

According to the Agriculture and Food Security Ministry's website, a total of RM27.59bil had been allocated to support the agriculture industry since 2021.

Loh said there is urgency to attract youths into modern farm-

ing as it is a major concern that many farmers are ageing.

"We need to make agriculture more attractive, or in other words, 'sexy'," he said, acknowledging that many young people preferred office jobs or flexible gig work over traditional farming.

"There's a prevailing negative perception of agriculture that must be addressed."

According to Prof Mad Nasir, three strategic pillars must be prioritised, namely policy intervention, technology adoption and facility support.

"Return on investment for food security should not be viewed in ringgit and sen alone.

"Food production delivers social returns which ensure national stability and access to food in times of crisis," he said.

He said that technology, while widely promoted in recent government initiatives, had yet to see widespread uptake.

Despite the availability of modern farming tools and systems, he said their adoption remained limited due to gaps in human capital and entrepreneurship.

"We need to treat food production as a business, operated by skilled entrepreneurs who can scale and innovate.

"Look at the oil palm industry and how advanced it has become. More than 70% of production comes from plantations.

"The plantations are commercialised with estate managers, high-tech systems and large listed companies," he added.

Prof Mad Nasir said supportive infrastructure and financing are equally essential to the transformation.

He urged financial institutions to become more approachable and responsive.

"We must offer grants and facilities to empower the next generation of agricultural entrepreneurs."