

A rich harvest for 'agropreneurs'

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NORTHERN CORRIDOR ECONOMIC REGION: Rural communities in Perlis, Penang, Kedah and Perak are being helped to raise their income through modern farming methods



C.S. Shashi (left) of Pengurusan Maskita Sdn Bhd's chicken farm in Sungai Siput, Perak, says he and his staff have trained 120 people since September last year to rear chicken in closed chicken coops.

GEORGE TOWN: Vegetables, fruits, shrimp and chicken are big business in the Northern Corridor Economic Region.

Profitable sales within the country and abroad have created jobs, ensured steady income for farmers and workers, and also led to the birth of modern "agropreneurs" in the rural communities of Penang, Perlis, Kedah and Perak.

In Ara Kuda, Tasek Gelugor in Penang, greenhouses are being built by Selangor-based company JPB Asia Pacific Sdn Bhd.

The closed greenhouse project cost RM35 million for phase one and RM100 million for the second phase. The first phase began in March this year on a 16ha plot while the second is expected to begin by the end of this year.

Now, four greenhouses are cultivating Japanese melons, pumpkins, peas and bittergourd. The crops are exported to Japan and Hong Kong, among others. Only a small portion of the crops are sold locally. Another two greenhouses are now being built to grow salads the hydroponic way.

JPB Asia Pacific managing director Mazri Mansor said each 0.4ha greenhouse would cultivate one type of crop.

The company is also growing "hot" and "extra hot" chillies in greenhouses in Bukit Kura in Kuala Nerang, Kedah.

"The closed greenhouse farming project has created 200 jobs and given 50 contract farmers a chance to become agropreneurs, earning RM5,000 each a month."

He said greenhouse farming was less burdensome and costly to farmers compared with open farming because the greenhouses kept insects out.

In Kedah's Kulim Hi-Tech Park, biotech company Kedah BioResources Corporation (KBioCorp) is using science to help fruit growers turn Malaysia into one of the largest MD2 pineapple exporters in the world.

KBioCorp chief executive officer Aminuddin Shuib said the company would be working on its MD2 seed development programme next year. Kedah wants to surpass Johor as the largest pineapple grower in the country.

"The Philippines is the biggest MD2 exporter in Asia now. This variant is very popular because it tastes sweet, smells good and has smoother skin," he said, adding that KBioCorp was also working on papaya tissue culture.

Papayas grown in Kedah Agro Holdings Bhd's (KAH) plantation in Bukit Tangga, Bukit Kayu Hitam near the Thai border are in high demand overseas, especially in China and the Middle East.

Kedah Menteri Besar Incorporated (PMBKed) chief executive officer Datuk Shahabudin Shafie said the fruit was also exported to Thailand, where the daily demand was 8,000 tonnes.

The Bukit Tangga plantation started its papaya commercial farming development programme in November last year. Planting began in July this year when almost 80,000 trees were planted on 52.6 hectares. KAH, a subsidiary of PMBKed, is planning to increase its papaya plantation to over 81ha by next month.

The company is also planning to further develop its tiger grouper breeding programme in Langkawi because the fish is in high demand in China, Singapore, Taiwan and Hong Kong, Shahbudin said.

"China and Taiwan cannot breed this fish, which is a delicacy and can fetch RM58 a kg."

Meanwhile, in Perak's rural agriculture areas of Kuala Gula and Sungai Siput, two engineers have become modern farmers and made big money in shrimp and chicken farming.

In Kuala Gula, Hannan Corporation Sdn Bhd chief executive officer Amir Ihsan Abd Salam, a trained mechanical engineer, is setting up a solar-powered Pacific white shrimp breeding project on swamp land.

The Selinsing Aquaculture Complex boasts a 121ha shrimp farm. This initial phase will feature 150 ponds that would produce 3,000 tonnes of shrimp a year.

Only six ponds are ready since the corporation began its collaboration with the Northern Corridor Implementation Authority (NCIA) two years ago but Amir Ihsan said the farm would be ready for operations before year-end.

"There were many challenges when we started but we have since overcome them.

"Now, some 70 per cent of the locals are supporting this project. They are beginning to see how this can improve their livelihoods."

He said the corporation will provide the capital, shrimp, feed and ponds, and will buy back the shrimp for export to Japan and for local consumption. Entrepreneurs, he added, could earn a monthly income of RM3,000 to RM4,000.

Over at Pengurusan Maskita Sdn Bhd's chicken farm in Sungai Siput, engineer C.S. Shashi and his staff of 15 train locals and entrepreneurs to rear chicken in closed chicken coops under its "Usaha IayaMKU" programme, which is funded by NCIA.

Shashi said his company, which was recognised as the first poultry training centre in the northern corridor, had trained 120 people since the programme began in September last year and among them, 11 now worked for Maskita while eight had become entrepreneurs with farms producing 3,000 to 15,000 chickens per cycle.

"Closed chicken coops are cleaner. Here we make about RM52,000 per cycle but we aim to reach RM80,000 by year end. We have a net profit of about RM300,000 a year for now."

The visits to the greenhouses, fruit plantations, shrimp and chicken farms in Penang, Kedah and Perak on Oct 9 and 10 were arranged by NCIA for the media.

Its chief executive Datuk Redza Rafiq said by engaging the local private sector to drive economic growth, job opportunities would increase and there would be more demand for workers with vocational skills.

"While we want to attract multinationals to come to the northern region, we must also ensure that the local communities benefit."