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Accurate narrative around palm oil vital

by NUR HAZIQAH A MALEK

THE narrative that oil palm acreages are expanding at the expense of climate and biodiversity is flawed, and a comprehensive census of resources, sinks and flows is needed to restore the narrative and dignity of Malaysia's golden crop.

Forest Research Institute Malaysia senior research officer Dr Gary W Theseira opined that the prevailing narrative surrounding the palm oil industry is that it is both land and labour-hungry, and frequently associated with indirect land use change (ILUC).

"The narrative needs to be corrected as there is ample evidence the palm oil industry actually facilitates climate action and enables transition by reducing emissions associated with mobility, counteracting ILUC as a non-tree and non-forest fibre source.

"It will also green the grid while optimising locked-in assets and reduce emissions from organic waste," he said in a lecture titled "How Integrating Resource Management in the Palm Oil Industry Can Shape Global Consensus on the Sustainability of the Humble Oil Palm" yesterday.

Theseira said the diverse resource base of the industry requires assessment across traditional sectoral lines used as the basis for government institutional frameworks.

He added that existing research and ongoing initiatives already point to the significant capacity of the current hectorage of oil palms to provide low-emission solid and liquid fuel, non-forest, non-timber pulp and paper, and by-products for upcycling that significantly impact greenhouse gas emissions, and meet and surpass ILUC criteria.

In the past few years, developed countries and trade blocs have implemented product seizures and unilateral carbon border adjustments by using "decarbonising economies" as a pretext.

In 2020 and 2021 for instance, the US put up a detention order on crude palm oil from two of Malaysia's major palm oil producers, as well as putting the nitrile glove shipments from Malaysia into detention.

Theseira said the industry has the potential in substituting environmentally harmful energy.

"The first resource area is by using the fatty acid methyl ester (FAME), which is successfully used as a base fluid for a high-performance, oil-based drilling fluid.

"Just seeing the FAME production in 2020, we can compare it to the equivalent that is required from fossil diesel, which is 465,887 tonnes of CO_2 emissions to 9.54 million tonnes CO_2 emissions."

Another resource in which the industry can be useful for is the pulp and paper, thus reducing potential land use.

Theseira said the industry has long been recognised as a potential fibre source for other industries.

"Potential products that have been tested and can be made include fibreboard, core-board, pulp and paper."

He added that resource substitution has averted the felling of 144,000 trees by utilising palm oil as fibre source.

The palm oil can also be used for biomass or renewable energy initiatives, by greening the grids for all users.

"Given the 30,200 gigawatt per hour generated in Peninsular Malaysia in 2018, a 5% biofuel substitution would yield an estimated 498,300 tonnes of emissions reduction.

"Every coal-fired power plant in Peninsular Malaysia and Sarawak is within a 30- to 45-minute access to one or more palm oil mills."

The last resource area in which palm oil can play a role is in the livestock food production space.

Currently, Malaysia's livestock industry requires around four million tonnes of feed to be imported yearly from South America.

"This means there are emissions from the transportation and production, but Malaysia is also exposed to supply and price uncertainties."

He added that substituting locally produced hide protein feed for imported feed will reduce costs and lower climate risk.

This can be done by upcycling technologies already in use to produce animal feed include biodigester and entoculture technologies that utilise palm oil by-products co-processed with other organic by-product streams.