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# Innovation to steer timber revival

**T**HE Malaysian Timber Council's (MTC) first female chairperson is on a mission to show young Malaysians that the timber industry is not a "sunset business".

As MTC turns 30 next month, Norrida Yusoff wants more young people to lead and transform the timber sector into an innovation-led industry.

This will be among Norrida's key undertakings in 2022, as she steers the country's timber industry towards a post-Covid-19 economic revival.

"The timber industry suffered losses amounting to about RM60 million daily in June this year due to the lockdowns.

"The pandemic led to disruptions in supply chain and cashflow management, increase in freight charges and increase in raw material costs.

"Timber supplies from and to Malaysia were delayed due to port congestion and the unavailability of empty containers.

"MTC, in March 2021, established the Export Assistance Programme (EAP) to assist Malaysian timber exporters, especially the small-and-medium-enterprises (SMEs), to defray part of the ocean freight charges.

"A total of RM1 million was allocated for this programme. As of Oct 31, disbursements were made to 104 companies covering 512 containers," she told the *New Straits Times*.

Nevertheless, Norrida is confident that the timber will rebound strongly in 2022, especially since the country has fully vaccinated over 95 per cent of its adult population.

"MTC also allocated RM1.3 million to expedite mass vaccination among workers from the timber-based sector through the industrial vaccination programme.

"A vaccination centre was also set up in Olak Lempit, Banting, Selangor, that successfully vaccinated 10,005 workers in August and September 2021," she said.

With exports to over 170 countries, Norrida said Malaysian timber products are highly sought-after due to greater supply reliability, superior quality and the availability of sustainable and certified timber products.

The industry, she said, has also made an impressive transition into an exporter of value-added products which was reflected in the country's timber export performance.

"From exports of predominantly upstream timber products valued at RM10.5 billion in 1992, exports have doubled to RM22.02 billion in 2020, with downstream timber products contributing more than 65.5 per cent to the total exports," she said.

At present, she said, Malaysia's strongest competitors in terms of timber exports are Vietnam, Indonesia and China.

Norrida believes innovation is the key to ensure Malaysia's timber industry remains competitive to outpace these competitors.

"We have been encouraging our timber entrepreneurs to move from being original equipment manufacturers to original design manufacturers and original brand manufacturers for higher export returns.

"MTC has implemented programmes such as TIMB3R Design Incubator Programme, TimbeReal-



Malaysian timber and timber-based products including furniture products are exported to over 170 countries all over the world.



ity, Malaysian Timber Industry Awards, among others, to push the timber industry in producing higher value products that require higher level of knowledge talents.

"We are also pushing the industry to adopt and adapt technologies related to the Fourth Industrial Revolution (IR4.0) through automation, digital and green technology acquisitions to purchase or retrofit machineries to achieve a higher level of automation.

"MTC has also established the Engineer Placement and Internship Programme (EPIP) to facilitate SMEs and non-SMEs in employing professional technical personnel such as

engineers to develop their careers in the timber industry," she said.

For 2022, Norrida said, MTC will encourage the timber industry to embrace circular economy and sustainability through development programmes for oil palm trunk products while embarking on product design collaborations with the Forest Research Institute Malaysia (FRIM).

MTC, she said, also hopes to establish the Environmental, Governance and Social (ESG) guidelines for the timber industry and step up replanting exercises.

"MTC will also explore ways to increase the supply of certified bu-

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**NORRIDA YUSOFF**  
Malaysian Timber Council's (MTC) first female chairperson

berwood in the domestic market with the cooperation of the Malaysian Timber Certification Council (MTCC) while complying with the country's regulations and rising pressure from international markets.

"We will also reach out to prison inmates on parole as part of its On-

Job Training (OJT) programme to supplement manpower shortage in the timber industry.

"MTC will also conduct programmes with local specifiers and authorities to promote timber use and set up a one-stop information portal on the industry's licence and permit requirements.

"We also intend to explore markets beyond the traditional ones, such as in South America, Africa, Southeast and Central Asia, while preserving our presence in key markets, like the United States, Europe, China and the Middle East," she said.

On a personal level, Norrida said she was humbled for being entrusted to head MTC despite the timber sector being a new field of interest for her.

When asked on her take on leading a male-dominated industry, Norrida said she has gotten accustomed to "being the only female in meeting rooms" throughout her professional life.

"Previously, I worked in the telecommunication industry which was also a male-skewed industry. So, I believe women should never feel intimidated to start their careers in a male-dominated industry.

"The timber industry does have women holding top management positions and I hope that the few positive examples seen in the industry will encourage more females to join the industry," she added.