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Plain speaking

INCREASED focus is placed on environmental, social and governance (ESG) standards in the timber industry, by governments, financiers, investors and the public.

With sustainability of the timber industry as a major issue, industry players are encouraged to develop large scale forest plantations and use alternative raw materials as part of their sustainable forest practices.

As fast-growing species are planted, forest plantations have become an increasingly important source of timber supply, helping to mitigate land degradation, improve soil fertility as well as sequester carbon and other climate change effects.

Should more forest plantations be developed, more natural forests might be saved, said the Malaysian Timber Industry Board (MTIB).

The private sector has actively participated in the development of commercial forest plantations, through low interest rate loans with sufficient repayment period, under the Forest Plantation Development Programme or Program Pembangunan Ladang Hutan (PPLH). By the end of December 2022, the total area approved under PPLH is 14,457.66ha with a loan value of RM1.01bil, involving seven states.

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A total of 89.7 million trees have been planted in the developed area, said MTIB.

The total expected output from this 15-year development with 11 fast-growing species, is about 26 million cubic meters of timber, which will benefit the timber industry for 20 years ahead, starting from 2022, said MTIB.

Sustainable forest practices help to keep the balance between ecological, economic and socio-cultural factors, as well as secure basic necessities, protect biodiversity and ecosystems, thus enhancing the quality of rural life.

As the sustainable path ahead, industry players have started to revolutionise the production of conventional wood composites into that of fibre-reinforced bio composites which are eco-friendly, involving the use of biomass.

Among the main alternative raw materials in the production of conventional wood composites are oil palm trunks (OPTs) which can be turned into value-added products such as particle boards and laminated boards, plywood, fibreboard and furniture.

Veneer and plywood manufacturers in Malaysia are already focusing on the production of OPT plywood for both interior and exterior applications, said MTIB.

A significant amount of biomass or natural fibre is generated each year, across a variety of crops or plantations – palm oil, coconut, rubber, wood and rice husk.

The palm oil sector is the largest contributor to the biomass industry; oil palm trees consist of huge amounts of lignocellulose materials – a plant biomass – in the form of empty fruit bunches, mesocarp fibres, palm kernel shells, fronds and trunks.

Forest-related biomass includes sawmill and plywood residues such as offcut and woodchips, wood and chip logs from plantations established for pulp mills, particleboard and fibreboard.

The Bio-Composite and Fibre Center, set up by MTIB in 2008, aims to facilitate the commercialization of research and development using various types of natural fibres in Malaysia for bio-composite products.

This is via linkages and smart partnerships with universities, research institutes and the industry.

For environmentally sensitive markets, the Life Cycle Analysis for primary timber products in Peninsular Malaysia, will help to establish the first element in determining the carbon footprint of Malaysian timber products.

The findings from this study may be used by the industry to develop the environmental product declaration to better market Malaysian timber products in environmentally sensitive markets, said MTIB.

The study is conducted by the Malaysian Wood Industries Association, MTIB and the Forest Research Institute Malaysia.

Sustainably harvested and manufactured products from naturally renewable sources play a fitting role in the circular economy.

This refers to the production chain for forest-derived goods and services, including conservation and management of forest ecosystems.

Resource efficiency is vital in the circular economy of the timber economy; not only is the timber re-planted, 100% of each log is used for making furniture, flooring, framing, mass-timber columns and beams, wood chips for bedding, sawdust for green energy.

There are four companies in Malaysia that are venturing into plywood from OPTs, and another four companies manufacturing wood plastic composite utilising sawdust and rice husk.

An innovation in the timber industry is the mixing of metal with wood plastic composite to produce structural panels, building materials for housing and load-bearing construction and furniture.

Wood and composites industries are utilizing wood and plant fibres as alternative materials, as they demonstrate a high strength-to-weight ratio as well as low density and are stiff, non-hazardous and biodegradable.

Further improvement in the timber industry involves the usage of sustainable energy in the production process, the adaptation of lean management in the manufacturing process and promoting the usage of legal and sustainable timber and timber products.

The government should educate the nation on the concept of ESG and sustainable development goals.

Experts in ESG from universities and agencies should be identified and encouraged to collaborate while expert groups from universities and research institutions as well as stakeholders should work together to promote sustainable and shared interests.

The promotion of Malaysian timber certification and sustainable forest management in the tropics, through empowering and engaging with local communities, will also lead to higher acceptability and better market access.

Yap Leng Kuen is a former StarBiz editor. The views expressed here are the writer's own.