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## Swiftlet industry in Sarawak ruffles feathers

**KUALA LUMPUR:** The edible swiftlet nest industry in this country is a highly lucrative one with the annual turnover reaching RM1bil.

However, a critical issue pertaining to the licensing of the swiftlet farms within buildings located in towns may retard the industry if no solution is found.

Local authorities are against the idea of having swiftlet farms in towns as they can cause nuisance to the public and pollute the environment.

But places like Sarawak, though the swiftlet farms are forbidden in towns, still has to find a solution for more than 1,500 illegal swiftlet farms. Any attempt to eradicate the illegal swiftlet farms will bring negative impact to the industry.

So what is the best option in solving this problem to ensure that the effort to boost the industry is not derailed? The licensing issue cropped up in October last year after the authorities conducted an exercise to clear up illegal swiftlet farms in Mukah town.

The move by the authorities has put many swiftlet farm owners in a quandary and raised many questions on the way the exercise was carried out.

During the exercise the swiftlet chicks protected under the Wildlife Act 1972 were left to die in the nests that were confiscated by the authorities. Those annoyed with the move even posted the video on the chicks' fate on the popular video sharing website Youtube.

The action taken by the local authorities has certainly ruffled some feathers, especially the swiftlet farmers.

Thus the Swiftlet Merchant Association in Mukah requested Chief Minister Tan Sri Abdul Taib Mahmud to help find a solution. The same request from the counterparts in Sibul and Sarikei followed suit.

The bottom line is that the farm owners wanted to continue operations in the existing premises with most of them being shoptlots.

But the local authorities are steadfast with their stand. Despite the edible swiftlet nest's huge commercial potential, Sarawak's 1998 Wildlife Protection Ordinance prohibits the species from being bred in other than its natural habitat like the caves and this has made things difficult for the industry.

The director of Sarawak's Forestry Department who is also the Wildlife Controller for Sarawak Datuk Len Talif Salleh stressed that the state government wanted the industry to be developed in a controlled manner in accordance with the existing laws.

Len Talif pointed out about 100 licenses have been approved from the 600 to 700 applications received since May.

"Most of the licenses approved are for the "oldplayers" who conform to the prerequisites.

"The rest were rejected as their proposed swiftlet farms are in towns," he said adding that enforcement measures would be taken against illegal swiftlet farms.

The licenses were issued for swiftlet farming in Mukah, Bintulu, Kuching, Kota Samarahan and Sarikei with all of the swiftlet farms in agricultural areas. Nonetheless, the industry views the issuance of the licence as a positive development when in May, only two of the more than 1,500 swiftlet farms in the state were licensed.

Swiftlet farming also needs approval from agencies like the Land and Survey Department, the Natural Resources and Environment Board (NREB) and the local authorities.

And the good news is that the state government is to build three swiftlet ecoparks in Mukah, Sarikei and Bintulu respectively with lots to be sold and rented out to those who are keen.

However, many are sceptical that the bird will nest at the ecopark and feared the bureaucratic hassle.

Thus this scepticism has prompted a big number of swiftlet farm owners to seek exemptions and continue with their activities in the existing premises in towns.

The swiftlet nest entrepreneurs also hope to adopt guidelines like the Good Animal Husbandry Practices (GAHP) for the swiftlets, so that they will be allowed to ply their trade within towns as done by their counterparts in Peninsula.

"We will follow this guideline," noted the protem chairman for the Sarikei Swiftlet Nest Merchants' Association Wong Hua Ting, which is in opposition to the state government's stand that the swiftlet farming should only be carried out at agricultural areas or the proposed ecopark.

Swiftlet farming in populated areas could create pandemonium among the public especially when there are diseases involving this species of bird.

The Veterinary Services Department (VSD) has conducted more than 5,000 tests on the birds and have confirmed that the swiftlet are free from bird flu and Newcastle disease.

The department is also preparing the guidelines on swiftlet farming and the draft proposals will be forwarded to the Steering Committee for the National Swiftlet Industry on Dec 14. The guideline known as "1GP" makes it compulsory for swiftlet breeding premises to be registered with department.

However, before the guideline could be adopted by the local authorities, it would be brought to the attention of the National Council on Local Government chaired by Deputy Prime Minister Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin, which is expected to meet March next year.

"The guideline will set the standard for all local governments. It will help traders and swiftlet farm owners to venture into this field in a more organised manner," said the chairman of the Federation of Swiftlet Nest Merchants' Associations Datuk Beh Heng Seong.

Regarding the guideline, Len Talif noted that the Sarawak state government is ready to adopt it as long as it does not contradict with the state ordinance which would be continuously enforced.

He also gave assurance that in future the nests would not be confiscated and instead a compound will be issued and only the equipment used will be confiscated.

This development is seen as a positive indication pertaining to enforcement but this does not mean it has opened the doors for all to start swiftlet farms without authorisation.

The government wants to see 100,000 swiftlet farms producing 500 tonnes of the bird's nest annually worth RM5 billion by

2020.

The swiftlet nest from this country is of high quality and is highly sought after in China and Arab with the prices fetching up to RM10,000 per kilogram. Thus the solution for this licensing issue is highly pertinent and all parties involved should work hand in hand to ensure that the edible bird nest industry remains vibrant and the nation stands at par with Indonesia and Thailand, the leading producers. - Bernama

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