

# Veteran's View

Oil palm  
'already sustainable'



**B**oon Weng Siew pushed open the conference door with the help of a walking stick and stepped into a room packed full with reporters and photographers from all major newspapers, television stations and foreign newswires.

He greeted the chief executives of the country's six biggest oil palm planters by their first name as they made way for him at the panel table.

Almost 90, he has a strong memory and is still quick with mental calculation – as proven when he patiently reeled off prices of various fertiliser ingredients and the amount applied on oil palm trees, without missing a beat.

Having planted rubber and oil palm for more than 50 years and led the Malaysian Estate Owners Association (MEOA) for almost two decades, Boon is highly respected by his peers. Established in 1931, MEOA represent 153 small and medium-sized estates of less than 40ha.

In a recent interview with *Global Oils and Fats Business Magazine*, Boon explained how Malaysia's small and mid-size oil palm estates are already practising

sustainable planting by virtue of compliance with environmental and labour laws.

All oil palm planters, whether as smallholders or estate owners, have to comply with the Environmental Quality Act 1974 and the Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) Order 1987.

"We've to prepare and submit EIA reports for land development covering an area of 500ha or more to bring forest land into agricultural production. Also, open burning of plant residues is not allowed in clearing land for planting," he said.

Then there are the provisions of the Employment Act, Industrial Relations Act and Minimum Standard of Housing and Amenities Act.

"Estate owners are not required by law to provide accommodation, schools, clinics and place of worship, but we do provide them as part of our corporate social responsibility," he said.

"However, when accommodation for workers is provided, the site and buildings must comply with the Minimum Standard of Housing and Amenities Act 1990. The estate

clinic has to comply with the Private Healthcare Facilities and Services Act 1998."

## **New demands**

On claims by some environmental activists that the monoculture oil palm plantation is unable to support rich diversity of wildlife, Boon countered: "That is not true.

"Shrubs, ferns, fungi and herbs, monkeys, birds, wild fowls, squirrels, rats and snakes flourish in oil palm plantations. Many of the plants, mammals, insects, reptiles and birds have adapted to the ecosystem in the plantations.

"Oil palm plantations are green lungs that generate oxygen which the developed part of the country breathes. These also fulfil many of the functions of rainforests. It has always been like that. Fifty years ago, we just call it good agricultural practices."

He noted that Malaysia's earliest oil palm estate – Tennamaram – was established in 1917 by Frenchman Henri Fauconnier in Batang Berjuntai, Selangor.

By 1925, some 3,350ha of oil palm had been planted. This expanded to 20,000ha just before World War II.