

Swift action on bird's nest issue

The health and agriculture and agro-based industry ministries are working with their Chinese counterparts on getting bird's nest exports to China moving again.



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WITHIN a week, delegations from two ministries were in China on a mission to settle the Malaysian bird's nest issue.

Agriculture and Agro-Based Industry Minister Datuk Seri Noh Omar led his senior officials on a visit to the China General Administration of Quality Supervision, Inspection and Quarantine (AQSIQ) during their official trip to Beijing on Nov 1-3.

The ministry and AQSIQ, which is responsible for inspection of imported and exported goods, agreed to set up a working committee on the procedural and administrative problems of the Malaysian swiftlet industry.

On Tuesday, Health Minister Datuk Seri Liow Tiong Lai met his counterpart Chen Zhu, and their meeting turned out well, with some very positive developments.

First, China acknowledged nitrite was present in its natural form in Malaysian bird's nest.

Secondly, the Chinese government said it would allow the sale of bird's nest imported from Malaysia again if these meet the new nitrite standards.

The Malaysian and Chinese health ministries formed a committee comprising food specialists and experts to determine the permissible level of nitrite in the product. The team will work around the clock to set the new standards. Nitrite is a toxic substance that may lead to chronic poisoning.

The positive thing coming out from these two ministerial meetings is that Malaysia showed it wants to resolve the issue as soon as possible and the Chinese side understood the urgency of the matter.

The swift actions by both govern-

ments came after Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak highlighted the issue to Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao on Oct 21 on the sidelines of the China-Asean Expo in Nanning, Guangxi Zhuang autonomous region.

The directives from the top all the way down in both governments and the quick reaction and coordination that followed, again showed the solid trust and bilateral ties between the two nations.

Malaysia cannot afford to wait any longer to resume its exports of bird's nest to China.

After all, the country is Malaysia's largest market with total exported volume of 100 tonnes last year and 20 tonnes this year before the industry was hit by the fake bird's

nest episode.

In July, a local watchdog in Zhejiang province announced that majority samples from some 30,000 cups of bird's nest contained nitrite levels above China's health standards and fingered bird's nest imports from Malaysia.

Following media reports on the so-called blood bird's nest where high levels of nitrite had been detected, many Chinese consumers shunned bird's nest.

After the State Administration for Industry and Commerce issued a notice in August to local authorities to beef up inspection on bird's nest to ensure food safety, most bird's nest products were removed from the shelves.

"Currently, the nitrite level permitted by the Chinese authorities is very low and the majority of Malaysian exporters are not able to meet the requirement," Liow said.

"The officials from the Chinese health ministry showed keen interest in addressing the problem.

"They accepted our explanation why there is natural development of nitrite during the raising of swiftlets.

"While natural nitrite is allowed, we agree that there should be no nitrite additive in the production of our bird's nest.

"We will now race against time to come out with new nitrite standards."

Noh said once the standard was determined, his ministry would ensure all bird's nest exporters registered with the ministry adhere to the new nitrite requirement.

"The Health Ministry is looking into the food safety of bird's nest exported to China while my ministry is tasked with certifying qualified bird's nest producers and ensuring that all production procedures are fulfilled before the products are exported," he said.

"We will also work with the Customs Department to beef up enforcement at airports to stop illegal exports of bird's nest to China."

Chinese statistics showed 500

tonnes of bird's nest imports, much higher than the export figure of 100 tonnes reported by Malaysian authorities.

This was because many exports went unaccounted for at exit points in Malaysia and were smuggled into China through Hong Kong as the mainland imposed a higher tariff.

Unscrupulous processors add red dye and sell it as blood nest, which can fetch a higher price.

According to Federation of Malaysia Bird Nest Associations president Datuk Paduka Beh Heng Seong, there were some bad apples in the industry who sold bird's nest to third parties for reproduction and repackaging.

In the wake of the import ban by China, the Agriculture and Agro-Based Industry Ministry have directed industry players to implement the Good Animal Husbandry Practice and Good Manufacturing Practice standards under the guidelines for the development of the swiftlet industry.

All the 56,000 producers and exporters must register with the Veterinary Services Department, which will establish a track-and-trace system to facilitate the movement of raw bird's nest across the supply chain.

The ministry said it would share information on the export of bird's nest with AQSIQ while making efforts to harmonise the standards for laboratory tests with its Chinese counterpart.

Judging by the urgency of all parties, the target of having the new nitrite guideline ready and the import ban lifted before Chinese New Year should not be too far from reality.