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### **Unimas comes up with R&D to turn palm oil EFBs into value-added products**

KUCHING: Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (Unimas) has come up with its research and development (R&D) proposals on turning palm oil empty fruit bunches (EFBs) into value-added products.

These proposals are currently being reviewed by CMS Agrotech Sdn Bhd, which manufactures organic compost and fertilizers.

If found to be feasible, CMS Agrotech would implement the R&D proposals this year, according to its parent Cahya Mata Sarawak Bhd in a brief announcement to Bursa Malaysia last Friday.

CMS Agrotech and Unimas established collaborations about three years ago to undertake the R&D project on "improvement of the composting technology for production of value-added compost/biofertilizer".

Malaysia, which produces an estimated 20 million tonnes of EFBs a year from crude palm oil processing, uses the empty bunches mainly as mulch in plantations and also as an alternative fuel for electricity generation.

Palm oil mills are said to be using the husks and drier, more fibrous parts of the oil palm fruits, rather than the EFBs, to fuel their boilers as the raw empty bunches contain nearly 60% of water.

EFBs have been reportedly becoming a popular source of fuel for renewable energy power generation. In the past, the end-product was considered waste that created environmental hazards because of the emittance of methane gas due to the way it was disposed off in the open.

According to Sarawak Oil Palm Plantations Owners Association secretary Philip Ho, EFBs have multiple usages — one of which is as an alternative to fertilizers for oil palm estates.

"We burn the EFBs, collect the ashes and spread them over the palms. It is very useful for peat estates in terms of savings," he told The Star yesterday.

However, Ho said many workers were reluctant to handle the ashes which could cause irritation to human skin.

He said if the ashes could be converted into pellets using modern technology, it would be of great help in terms of transporting them for usage in palm oil estates.

“To convert the ashes into pellets will definitely facilitate management. Nonetheless we still have to look at the cost of implementing such a technology,” he added.

Processed EFBs, according to research reports, are a rich source of organic agents that can be used to produce fertilizers for farming as well as an excellent mulching material for landscaping, young plants and seedlings.

They can also be the raw materials for manufacturing composite boards like medium density fibre boards, particle boards and cement boards.

Source: The Star