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National framework for biosafety key to Malaysia's biotechnology sector

Kuala Lumpur, 29 August 2006 – As Malaysia embarks on its drive to pursue biotechnology as one of the new income sources of the nation as reflected in the Ninth Malaysia Plan, biosafety and the safe transfer, handling and use of Living Modified Organisms (LMOs) become increasingly important and relevant issues.

In line with this, the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment (NRE) and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) organised a national policy dialogue to create awareness and to understand and further deliberate on the issues of liability and redress.

The Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety addresses the safe transfer, handling and use of LMOs that may have an adverse effect on biodiversity, taking into account human health, with a specific focus on transboundary movements.

The issues of liability and redress for damage resulting from the transboundary movements of LMOs was one of the themes on the agenda during the negotiation of the Biosafety Protocol. As the matter was very contentious, negotiators were unable to reach any consensus regarding the details of a liability regime under the Protocol.

The objectives of the NRE-UNDP dialogue were:

1. To enable a wider group of audience and stakeholders to participate in the dialogue of this very important issue, which will create better awareness and understanding;
2. To study the options available in this issue and allow for further deliberation in the context of the overall national biosafety framework; and
3. To enable policy makers to formulate regulation/policy on liability and redress on biosafety.

During the opening of the dialogue, YB Dato' S. Sothinathan, Deputy Minister of Natural Resources and Environment said that in Malaysia's capacity as President of the Convention on Biological Diversity and the Biosafety Protocol from 2004 to 2006, it played an active and constructive role to move towards the achievement of the objectives of the Convention and the Protocol.

Malaysia will continue to play an active role in the meetings of the Convention and the Protocol, he said. Towards this end the policy dialogue today is important to assist the government in formulating policies in the interest of the country and the *rakyat* as well as increasing the awareness about the issue at all levels.

"Knowing enough, and acting wisely enough, across the full range of environmental and related health issues seems daunting," Dato' S. Sothinathan told participants.

"The interconnections between issues, the pace of technological change, our limited understanding and the decades it can take the ecological and biological systems to be damaged by our technologies together present a very complex situation," he said.

Hence, he stressed, "we must continue to monitor for potential risk, just like any other technology."

At the same time, the development of science and technology in this field must continue in a safe and ethical manner, he said. At the moment, Malaysia has no commercial field planting of GMOs.

According to Dr. Richard Leete, Resident Representative, UNDP Malaysia, "Although, the responsibility of producing a national biosafety framework in Malaysia is within the purview of the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment, the implementation of the framework needs the cooperation of various government agencies and other stakeholders. "

Dr Leete also added that UNDP, together with NRE and with the funding from Global Environment Facility (GEF), will implement a national project on Biosafety this year. This four-year project will develop national capacities in biosafety required to carry out risk assessments with appropriate scientific and technical skills; implement necessary activities for risk management; evaluate and strengthen the legal and regulatory frameworks and develop infrastructure for information exchange and data management, as well as achieve broad social participation in biosafety matters.

"The development of national capacities in these areas will consolidate the national framework for biosafety management, with lasting impact on Malaysia's vision to utilise biotechnology for sustainable development and economic growth," he said.

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NOTE TO EDITOR

UNDP is the UN's global development network, advocating for change and connecting countries to knowledge, experience and resources to help people build a better life. We are on the ground in 166 countries, working with them on their own solutions to global and national development challenges. As they develop local capacity, they draw on the people of UNDP and our wide range of partners. Its current priority is to help all countries achieve the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) by 2015.

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For further information, please contact:

Mr. Nagulendran Kangayatkarasu
Principal Assistant Secretary,
Conservation and Environmental Management Division,
Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment,
Aras 14, Blok Menara 4G3, Precint 4,
Pusat Pentadbiran Kerajaan Persekutuan, 62574 Putrajaya
Phone: 03-88861111, Fax: 03-88861512

Mr. Hari Ramalu Ragavan
Senior Programme Manager
United Nations Development Programme
Wisma UN, Block C, Kompleks Pejabat Damansara,
Jln Dungun, Damansara Heights, 50490 KL
Tel No. 603 2091 5178 Fax : +60 3 2095 2870