



Persatuan Pengguna Pulau Pinang Consumers Association of Penang

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Letter to Editor

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Are Malaysians second rated consumers where food safety is concerned?

Time and again we hear of Malaysian produce being rejected by other countries. The latest being bottled mineral water recalled by the Singaporean authorities. The particular bottled mineral water was found to contain *Pseudomonas aeruginosa* – a common bacterium that is found in faeces, soil, water and sewage.

It is strange that such an incident was not discovered by our local authorities even though it is estimated that Malaysians consumed more than 100 million bottles a year. Given the situation many Malaysian consumers may have consumed the contaminated water.

The main legislations regulating food safety in the country are the Food Act 1983, Food Regulations 1985 and Food Hygiene Regulations 2009. They aim to protect the public against food-related hazards and frauds, to promote safe preparation, handling, distribution and the sale of healthy and high quality food.

As food safety has to be maintained from production to consumption, many ministries and agencies are involved in the process. Among them are the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Agriculture, local authorities and Customs (for import and export of food).

In spite of the existence of the law and the enforcement body entrusted to ensure that Malaysian citizens get safe and wholesome food we rarely hear of our local produce being recalled.

However many recalls of Malaysian foods in foreign countries besides the rejection of mineral water have been reported:

- > In 2018, iceberg lettuce recalled by Singaporean authorities after it detected high levels of pesticide in the vegetable imported from a Malaysian farm
- > In 2017, China rejected fruits from Cameron Highlands due to the presence of living modified organism (LMO).*
- > In 2016, Malaysian prawns, mostly from Penang aquaculture farms, were rejected by the US government due to the presence of banned antibiotics (nitrofurans and chloramphenicol.)
- > In 2015, some 300 batches of vegetables - mostly leafy greens - and fruit were stopped from being sold in Singapore, after pesticide residues found on samples exceeded levels allowed by the authorities. It is said that 3%-5% of veggies and fruit from Malaysia exceeded pesticide limits set by the Singaporean authorities.

Due to the bad track record of agricultural produce, since May 1, exporters of Malaysian agricultural produce to Singapore need to register with our Ministry of Health to have the **MyFood Tag** identification which is a mechanism to strengthen food safety control and traceability in the food supply chain.

While it is a voluntary certification in Malaysia, produce without **MyFood Tag** will not be allowed to enter Singapore.

The certification process audits the production, storage, transport, processing and distribution of food items. The MyFood Tag system should be made mandatory to improve food safety for Malaysians.

According to the Deputy Health Minister Lee Boon Chye the requirement of **MyFood Tag** which are for produce due for Singapore was a request from the Singapore authorities and will only apply to fresh vegetables and fruits at the moment.

The government should conduct checks consistently, regardless of whether the vegetables are meant for export or local consumption. Unsafe vegetables must be removed from the market and farmers who sell unsafe fruits and vegetables must be punished.

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Acting President
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* LMOs are defined as any living organism that has a combination of genetic material obtained through modern biotechnology. Modern biotechnology enables gene-transferrals between different organisms. Presently LMO products imported into our country include seeds, animal feed and rice Common LMOs include agricultural crops that have been genetically modified for greater productivity or for resistance to pests or diseases..