



Persatuan Pengguna Pulau Pinang Consumers Association of Penang

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Press statement

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Shocking! Ever increasing food wastage during Ramadhan

The Consumers Association of Penang (CAP) urges the people not to waste food because much food goes into the landfill. Studies have shown that food waste increased between 15 to 20 per cent during Ramadhan as compared with an average month.

It was reported that in 2018 as much as 20,088 tonnes of food went into the garbage bin nationwide daily during Ramadhan. With that quantity wasted daily during the entire month of Ramadhan there is enough to feed one and a half times the Malaysian population. This year, the estimated food and plastic materials discarded daily during the holy month was 10,000 tonnes.

On such a holy month Muslims should remember that fasting is an act of worship, a way to become more compassionate to those in need, and a chance to get closer to God. Al-Isra-27, Surah *The Journey by Night* Verse-27 says, “Indeed, the wasteful are brothers of the devils, and ever has Satan been to his Lord ungrateful.”

Food wastage can lead to an increase of food prices as it increases demand in relation to supply. Moreover, we are highly dependent on food import which are usually transacted in US dollars. With our current exchange rate, we have to pay more for the same quantity. For Malaysia, it is the outflow of our currency.

The government should form a taskforce to understand the underlying problems contributing to high food wastage. Was the high food wastage due to consumers buying more food than they can eat during the breaking of fast or was it because of over-estimating of the quantity of food to be prepared by the food hawkers?

Consumers may not be able to waste that astronomical amount of food because that will incur expenses. It is likely that the home-based food hawkers prepared too much food in anticipation of good business when Muslims purchase their food in preparation of the breaking of fast. If this is true, then we have to consider several other facts:

- The food is prepared in ordinary homes where the refrigerator capacity, cooking stoves, and storage space are limited, thus increasing the likelihood of bacterial contamination.
- Most of the dishes have either meat and/or coconut milk that can easily go bad and it is not practical to bring stoves to heat up the dishes at the stall. Temperature of at least 74°C is required to kill the bacteria in food but the highest temperature during the day in Malaysia is around 33°C.
- The dishes have to be prepared early and stored in containers for hours between the time of preparation to the time they were displayed at the stall. During this time, at normal temperature, bacteria will multiply at a prodigious rate.
- Any unsold food is not likely to be taken back as some of the food had already gone bad. They had to be discarded. Others experience food storage problems as many of these food hawkers are home-

based, thus lacking commercial refrigerators and freezers. The food that remains at the end of the day has to be binned too. Moreover, they desperately need all available containers for the food prepared the next day.

- The food hawkers have to depend on the patronage of their customers and the quantity they are buying. For the customers, even if they overestimated the quantity that their family members are going to consume, they will be held back by how much they are going to spend on the *berbuka puasa* (breaking of fast). However, the food hawker will have no option but to hope for good business despite stiff competition from neighbouring food stalls.

On this premise, we urge the relevant authorities to consider:

- Requiring applicants to state the food that they intend to sell at a particular Ramadhan bazaar. The authorities will then limit the number of stalls selling the same type of food. Business competition is good but if it is over saturated, it becomes untenable for some. This can be translated into food wastage as customers are spoilt for choice.
- The size of a Ramadhan bazaar has to be determined according to the size of the community. We have to know that there is always a limit to the number and quantity of food a person wants to buy and this will then be related to the size of the nearby community. Consequently, businesses will be negatively impacted if the number of stalls are too many.
- Plan the Ramadhan bazaar early so that the authorities can plan the location of the stalls so that stalls selling the same type of food would be spread out.
- Encourage people to bring their own food containers and ask the food hawkers not to supply drinking straws for drinks or plastic forks and spoons. The reason is that these people are not expected to eat immediately but to take home for *berbuka puasa* and thus do not need eating utensils.
- Food that is still in good condition can be donated to either Food Banks or to soup kitchens for the poor and homeless.

The selling of food at Ramadhan bazaar should not be a free-for-all because if it is oversized, it is not going to benefit the hawkers and traders. On the contrary it is going to result in food wastages that remained unresolved for decades.

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