



From Bulletin Editor: Another New Beginning

By: Engr. Mah Soo, F.I.E.M., P. Eng.

The yesteryear of 2006 has just ended with some flourishing positive results. The economy seemed to head towards recovery with the government launching the Ninth Malaysia Plan (9MP) for implementation, while the Malaysian Share Market Composite Index has emphatically breached the 1,000 point resistance barrier and IEM has successfully hosted CAFEQ 24.

“Time and tide wait for no one!” Reminiscing about events of 2006 without commitment to resolutions made for the New Year would be a waste of time and energy. Hence all of us should be expected to take stock and plan strategies for implementation in the New Year!

The new year of 2007 has just started and hopefully it will give everyone another new beginning. We all always hope for better things to come and it is up to every individual depending on how much effort and commitment they would put in to make things happen.

Our Prime Minister, YAB Dato’ Seri Abdullah Haji Ahmad Badawi, launched the National Biotechnology Policy (NBP) on 28 April 2005 with its Nine-Thrusts Plan at BioMalaysia 2005 at the Putrajaya International Convention Center. Then we have BioMalaysia 2006, which was held at the Kuala Lumpur Convention Centre on 6–8 December 2006. Great emphasis had been placed on the development of the biotechnology in this country but do we have answers to questions such as: “How much have we achieved or could be achieved in the near future and how IEM, as a learned society with professionals in diverse engineering disciplines, could contribute towards this new frontier of science and technology?”

In order to be able to contribute, one must be at least knowledgeable of the subject if not already an expert in such disciplines. One needs to know what are the national frameworks, policies, focus

areas and funds available to attract entrepreneurs as pioneers in this new national and global arena. To a layman, biotechnology encompasses materials from living organisms (from the prefix ‘bio’) and the application of technology to make the industry viable. Biotechnology areas are associated with plants, animals and food, for example, proteomics, genomics, enzyme and protein engineering, biosensors, phytomedicine and phytochemistry. If one had visited BioMalaysia 2006, some exposure would have been obtained about the above terms and jargons. In line with the philosophy of life-long learning and continuous professional development, it would be interesting to know how many of IEM members have been to either one or both the BioMalaysia Convention and Exhibitions, or have met with some familiar faces during such visits. Knowing engineers’ heavy workloads and hectic lifestyles, and with many that are already complacently nested in their comfort zone in conservative engineering environments, one may expect the answer to be like “finding a needle in a haystack” though it is hoped that this would not be the case.

Also associated with biotechnology is biodiesel obtained from the golden crop of palm oil. During the oil price hike and shortages of diesel, biodiesel has generated a tremendous amount of excitement as it could be used by diesel-engine vehicles with little or no modification. Malaysia is blessed with an abundance of palm oil, sometimes known as the ‘Green Gold’, which supplies the basic raw materials for the biodiesel industry. To reassure biodiesel investors that there would be an adequate supply of this raw material, Malaysia and Indonesia, being the two biggest palm oil producers in the world, have agreed to set aside six million tonnes of crude palm oil (CPO) annually to be used as feedstock for

biofuel and biodiesel manufacturing. Biofuel and biodiesel are derived from biological sources such as palm oil. The processes to produce the final product of diesel-equivalent fuel are blending or transesterification. Some have envisaged a mandatory use of a 5% palm oil fuel blend by all land and sea transport by 2008. The government has so far issued some 52 biodiesel licenses and the New Year would see some exciting change of events as the government starts to monitor the progress of these holders.

To show that the government is serious to achieve results, if the progress of such license holders is found to be ‘not satisfactory’, they would be issued ‘show-cause’ letters and in the worst-case scenario, their licenses may even be revoked.

To be able to compete globally in such technologies, the government has encouraged their development through R&D activities and also by acquiring technology through technology transfers in joint ventures with foreign expertise to shorten the learning curve.

There ought to be many IEM members who could apply their engineering expertise and entrepreneurship to take advantage of the fund of RM150 million allocated under the 9MP in helping to create an impetus to boost the biotechnology industry. This sum of RM150 million is from the total of RM730 million allocated under the ‘Malaysian Life Science Capital Fund’ which the government has launched in aspiring to make Malaysia a global biotechnology hub.

With so much opportunities present, we should not let them slip through without giving some serious thought as to how we could harness the vast potential of the New Year to our advantage. ■