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Subject: (EMBARGOED) Speech by Mr Mah Bow Tan, 9 March 2000, 9.15 am

Singapore Government

PRESS RELEASE

Media Division, Ministry of Information and the Arts, #36-00 PSA Building, 460 Alexandra Road,
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**SPEECH BY MR MAH BOW TAN, MINISTER FOR NATIONAL
DEVELOPMENT, AT THE OPENING OF FOODAGRI 21 EXHIBITION
ON THURSDAY, 9 MARCH 2000 AT 9.15 AM AT THE WORLD TRADE
CENTRE**

ENSURING HIGH STANDARDS OF FOOD SAFETY & ANIMAL
AND PLANT HEALTH IN THE NEW MILLENNIUM

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Introduction

Singaporeans today enjoy ample supplies of safe primary foods at stable prices. Our standards of food safety and animal and plant health are comparable to those of developed and advanced countries. This exhibition showcases the progress we have made in improving our food safety standards and in protecting our people, animals and plants from highly infectious diseases. I would like to take the opportunity this morning to reflect on the past developments and highlight some of the new challenges we will face in maintaining the high standards of food safety and security we now enjoy.

Past Developments

2 In the 1960s and 70s, the challenge was for Singapore to grow most of its primary food locally. At that time, there was a large rural community involved in farming. To support local food production, PPD spearheaded various programmes, including the setting up of veterinary centres and extension services, agriculture research stations, abattoirs and fishing ports. These efforts enabled farmers to intensify and improve their farming methods to produce safe primary foods, and attain high levels of sufficiency in poultry, pork and eggs, ranging from 80% for chicken and over 100% for eggs.

3 In the 1980s, many farmers had to be resettled to provide land for housing and industry. To maximise the productivity of farmlands and provide Singapore with a measure of self-sufficiency, PPD embarked on the development of Agrotechnology Parks on 2000 ha of land set aside for farming. At the same time, an integrated food safety programme was established to ensure the safety of an ever-increasing volume and variety of imported primary foods. The programme involved accreditation of overseas sources of food and stepping up food safety inspections

4 Concurrently surveillance and control programmes were also put in place to protect Singapore from exotic animal and plant diseases.

By maintaining strict quarantine measures and up-to-date disease diagnostic laboratories, we have been successful in keeping out animal and plant diseases that can cause serious and extensive damage to the local population of animals and plants, as well as our people. For example, Singapore is the only country in the region free from dreaded diseases such as rabies. Our animal and plant health certification is also accepted worldwide.

5 These achievements would not have been possible if not for the team of competent, dedicated and specialised professionals nurtured within PPD over past 40 years. Today, a wealth of expertise and experience in agriculture, food safety and veterinary science resides within the department.

Challenges and Opportunities Ahead

Detecting and Controlling Emerging Diseases

6 Let me now turn to the future challenges as well as opportunities. In recent years, there have been reports world-wide on food-poisoning outbreaks due to food-borne organisms such as E.coli 0157 and Listeria, as well as outbreaks of

animal diseases that can be passed to humans such as Mad Cow Disease, Avian Flu and the Nipah virus disease.

These and other highly infectious diseases such as Foot-and-Mouth Disease and rabies have become established in other parts of the world and pose a constant threat to the health of our people. In addition to known diseases, there is always a potential for a disease agent present in animals and birds to suddenly develop the ability to infect humans with devastating results.

7 We thus need to remain constantly vigilant and alert to keep such disease threats at bay. Our professionals also need to continually upgrade their expertise and be equipped to meet these challenges.

Diversifying Food Sources

8 Currently, we have an adequate supply of food for our people. However, much of our fresh food is derived from a few major sources. Any disruption in supply due to unforeseen circumstances in any one of our major supply sources can have a severe impact on our food supply. We thus need to continually identify new sources of food while continuing to maintain and improve on the quality and safety of our food. To meet this challenge, we will have to set up programmes to influence the food production process at source. This may include encouraging overseas investment in food production and the transfer of farming technology.

Becoming Regional Hub for Food Distribution

9 Another avenue to ensure a good supply of food is to develop Singapore into a regional hub for food distribution. This brings with it two main advantages. Firstly, we will have access to more varieties of food than is currently available. Secondly, there will be more food stored in the country at any one time, thus providing a greater buffer in times of emergency.

Extending Lab Services to the Region

10 Agricultural production in the region is expected to gain impetus and become more intensive to keep pace with economic and population growth. Under intensive farming conditions, however, an outbreak of an infectious disease can have a disastrous effect on the farming industry. One example is the Nipah virus outbreak that almost decimated the pig industry in Malaysia. With greater emphasis placed on safeguarding animal and plant health worldwide, the prevention of disease has thus become more critical in food production. The

availability of comprehensive and reliable laboratory support is critical to the success of such preventive programmes. Given that our excellent veterinary public health, and laboratory services are recognised internationally, there is potential for our laboratory services to be expanded to service the ASEAN region.

R&D in Agri-biotechnology

11 Agri-biotechnology is the science with the greatest potential to improve agriculture in this millennium. PPD, together with other research institutes, is already carrying out research and development in this area. New products such as animal vaccines, genetically modified and superior plants and fish are being developed for the international market. The various research institutes such as the Institute of Molecular Agrobiology and the Department of Biological Sciences of NUS, together with private companies being set up in PPD's Agri-Bio Park will play an important role to spearhead this development.

Gearing Up for the Future

12 To meet the future challenges and seize the opportunities, we need to upgrade our capability and supporting infrastructure. The Government has committed funds to build 2 new laboratories by 2002 -- the Veterinary Public Health Laboratory and the Animal and Plant Health Laboratory.

Equipped with state-of-the-art facilities and capabilities, these laboratories will strengthen our ability to deal with emerging threats. At the same time, they will be well-positioned to serve as regional reference centres for food safety, and for animal and plant health.

13 The fish processing industry was given a boost with the setting up of the Marine Fisheries Research and Development Centre in December last year. Similarly, the Marine Aquaculture Centre in St John's Island is poised to spearhead marine aquaculture development in the region upon its completion in June this year.

Agri-food and Veterinary Authority

14 Maintaining our high standard of food safety and animal and plant health will become increasingly difficult. Besides professional expertise and infrastructure, we must also be agile in order to deal with emerging threats efficiently and effectively. For this reason, PPD will be restructured into a statutory board, the Agri-food and Veterinary Authority or AVA, come 1 April.

AVA will have greater autonomy and flexibility so that it can better respond to the challenges faced by the food and agriculture industry in the coming years. I am confident that the existing team of highly trained professionals will build on the achievements of PPD in the last 40 years and bring AVA to greater height.

15 I am pleased that many industries that have worked alongside PPD through the years are also active participants at this commemorative event. This speaks well of the close working relationship between government and industry. I would like to encourage the industry to continue building on this close relationship with government so as to further develop the food and agriculture sectors.

16 It now gives me great pleasure to declare FoodAgri 21 open.

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