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Singapore Government

PRESS RELEASE

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THE AGRI-FOOD AND VETERINARY AUTHORITY BILL 2000

SECOND READING SPEECH BY MR MAH BOW TAN **MINISTER FOR NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT**

1 Mr Speaker, Sir, I beg to move, "That the Bill be now read a Second time."

Objective of Bill

2 The Government intends to restructure the Primary Production Department (PPD) into a statutory board, called the Agri-food and Veterinary Authority, AVA, on 1 Apr 2000. The proposed Agri-food and Veterinary Authority Bill 2000 is to provide the legislative framework for the formation of the new statutory board.

Rationale

3 Sir, let me now explain the rationale for the new statutory board.

4 First, allow me to provide this House with some background on PPD and how it has evolved over time. PPD was formed in 1959 to develop and regulate the local farming industry. Through its agricultural development and health programmes, PPD ensured that local farms produced safe and quality food for consumption.

5 With the gradual shrinking of the agricultural sector over the years due to urbanisation and industrialisation, PPD's role and focus also shifted in tandem. Currently, PPD ensures the safety of primary food imports, which include meat, fish, eggs, fruits and vegetables. It also prevents and controls animal, bird, fish and plant diseases, promotes animal welfare, as well as develops the agricultural industry and facilitate trade in agriculture produce.

6 Sir, in October last year, in my addenda to the President's address, I informed this House that we will diversify our sources for the supply of safe foods to meet the needs of our growing population. We will also upgrade our food inspection and surveillance systems and laboratory services to further improve on food safety.

7 Today, local farm production supplies only 1.5% of the poultry, 10% of the fish, 30% of the eggs and 6% of the vegetables consumed in Singapore. The bulk of our primary food requirements come from overseas sources. This heavy dependence on primary food imports has made Singapore vulnerable to disruptions in primary food supplies due to unforeseen circumstances at the sources of supply. We therefore need to continually identify new sources of supply so that we can maximise food security.

8 Our heavy reliance on food imports also makes us vulnerable to outbreaks of food-poisoning and zoonotic diseases, where animal diseases are transmitted to humans. In recent years, there have been disease outbreaks, such as the Mad Cow Disease, Avian Flu and the Nipah virus. It is vital for us to maintain a high level of integrity in our food safety system to detect, prevent and control emerging diseases and food hazards.

9 Mr Speaker, Sir, it is timely to restructure PPD into a statutory board. The statutory board will have a mandate to ensure the safety of Singapore's primary food needs. It will also be responsible for animal and plant health, animal welfare and the agricultural industry, all of which are integral components of an integrated food safety system.

10 As a statutory board, AVA can leverage on its expertise in agriculture and veterinary science to offer consultancy services to the food and agriculture industries in Singapore and the region. This may enable more overseas farms to meet our food safety requirements and enable them to export their food to Singapore. AVA can also provide consultancy services to assist our local farmers to set up farms, as well as facilitate the setting up of overseas food producing projects for supply to Singapore.

11 AVA can look into making Singapore an agricultural hub and distribution centre in the region. This will increase the trading of agricultural and food products through Singapore, and enable us to have access to more varieties of food.

12 AVA will plug into the relevant international networks to monitor closely the global spread and incidences of potentially dangerous diseases. It will also maintain world class diagnostic and testing laboratories. Resources are now being put in place. Two new laboratories are being set up and will be ready by 2002. They will have the latest equipment and instrumentation for the detection of disease agents and harmful food contaminants as well as genetically modified foods.

Main Features of the Bill

13 Mr Speaker, Sir, I will now touch on the main features of the Bill.

14 Part I of the Bill gives the short title and interpretation of the Bill. Part II provides for the establishment, incorporation and constitution of the Authority.

15 Part III spells out the functions and powers of the Authority. These are essentially the same as those already vested in PPD, either administratively, or through the various existing Acts administered by PPD. It will also be able to form companies, joint ventures or partnerships.

16 Part IV and V of the Bill relate to staff and financial matters. In particular, Clause 16 includes provisions to protect the Authority from liability in respect of products or processes which have been deemed to have conformed to the Authority's requirements. This is required as the AVA will be involved in formulating standards and issuing certificates, brands or other marks related to the agri-food and veterinary sectors.

17 Part VI comprises the transitional provisions relating to the transfer of property, assets and liabilities of the PPD to the AVA. Under Clause 31, all persons employed by PPD shall be transferred to AVA. The terms will be no less favourable than those enjoyed by the officers immediately prior to their transfer. The pension rights of Government employees would also be preserved under Clause 32 of the Bill.

18 Part VII of the Bill covers the miscellaneous provisions such as the Authority's symbol, powers of enforcement and power to make Regulations under the Bill. These provisions will help the Authority in carrying out its functions. This Part also includes the list of consequential amendments to be made to other legislations which are currently administered by the PPD and to any other legislation referring to PPD or the Director of Primary Production.

Conclusion

19 Sir, we are facing new challenges in ensuring the safety of our primary food needs and in dealing with threats from emerging diseases and harmful food contaminants. The restructuring of PPD into AVA will allow us to have a statutory board to work towards managing these challenges.

20 Mr Speaker, Sir, I beg to move.

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