

Klaten farmers ward off pests with aid of scarecrows

By Blontank POeR

SURAKARTA, Central Java (JP): For farmers, harvest failure or a steep drop in the price of agricultural products is very frustrating. Often, just as frustrating is the Ministry of Agriculture official's insistence that the farmers use the chemicals they prescribe: urea or calcium chloride fertilizer and various pesticides. Usually, the official guarantees that the farmers will prosper if they do what he says.

The farmers cannot refuse what they are told to do, although they might know that excessive use of inorganic fertilizers will tip the balance of soil's chemical properties. While the uncontrolled use of pesticides makes insects immune to chemicals.

It was out this environmental concern that hundreds of farmers in Koripan village, Klaten regency, Central Java, held a unique scarecrow festival from Dec. 12 through Dec. 19. People of all ages enthusiastically participated in the event. Every participant came with an artistic scarecrow, traditionally used to scare off birds that prey on their food crops.

Twenty-three scarecrows were presented to a panel of judges in a soccer field before the scarecrows were paraded around the village and installed in 10 hectares of paddy fields.

Over the week, different groups — farmers, youths and

students — toiled to come up with the most creative scarecrow.

Interestingly, most of the scarecrows had graffiti on their bodies — messages of anti-inorganic chemicals in agriculture. The committee members claimed they did not instigate the farmers to write the messages but said they were happy on realizing that the farmers had environmental awareness, as activists have relentlessly been campaigning.

The festival was initiated by the Care for the Environment Group and The Taring Padi People's Culture Institute, both based in Yogyakarta.

Activists of the two organizations said the festival aimed to boosting the farming spirit of people in Delanggu, which is known as one of Central Java's main producers of high-grade rice. They see that many villagers are losing interest in farming. They have begun selling their land to get money to start other more profitable businesses in the cities.

With this festival, through an artistic approach, farmers were encouraged to optimize the use of traditional farming tools produced by their fellows in the neighboring Koripan village,

well-known for making *keris* (Javanese dagger).

Scarecrows have become a form of art highly popular among farmers. They are not only good for scaring off grain-eating birds but are also used in rituals to Dewi Sri, the Goddess of Life, in Javanese tradition.

For example, soon after planting, farmers hold a ceremony called *nedhuni* in which they pray to Dewi Sri for fertile ground that will endow a good harvest. Then, before harvesting, farmers will hold a thanksgiving ritual called *wisat*.

A scarecrow is made of any material on hand and placed in the field when the paddy crops begin to mature. Usually, farmers will place several scarecrows in one field, each connected to the other with thick string. The end of the string is tied to a shackle built on a dike. When birds flies into the field, the farmers will shake the scarecrows by pulling the string.

In addition to the scarecrows, some farmers also beat a bamboo drum to scare off the birds.

Scarecrows are also a visualization of "evil spirits", which are the farmers' enemies: like the birds and insects which destroy their crops, the capitalists who dictate prices, monopolize seeds and fertilizers and corrupt officials who draft regulations that do not benefit farmers.

