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Industry players want longer grace period

PETALING JAYA: While many have welcomed the move to provide housing for foreign workers, some industry players have raised concerns over it, including asking for a longer grace period.

Federation of Malaysian Manufacturers (FMM) president Tan Sri Soh Thian Lai said the amendments to the Minimum Standards of Housing and Amenities (Amendment) Act was a good decision in the long term as it would ensure conducive housing condition for all workers, and enhance the health and productivity of the workforce in the country.

However, Soh said the amendments, which would come into force on June 1 in Peninsular Malaysia and the Federal Territory of Labuan, could pose some challenges to fulfilling them.

The Human Resources Ministry said the government would give a three-month grace period until Aug 31 to give room for employers to make the necessary arrangements.

The enforcement under the Act will begin on Sept 1. The amendments to the Act was passed in Parliament last July and was gazetted on Sept 18.

"But with the huge number of foreign workers in Malaysia, around two million documented

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We urge the authorities to give companies at least six months to reset and rearrange according to the SOP.

Tan Sri Soh Thian Lai

and about four million undocumented, it could pose a big challenge to fulfil conditions under the amendments of the Act within 15 months, including the three-month grace period as all affected employers who employ foreign workers must comply with it," said Soh.

"Now that the highest risk clusters of Covid-19 infections are foreign workers, this Act is timely – but it's too short a time to get the employers prepared.

"We urge the authorities to give more time, at least six months, for companies to reset and rearrange according to the standard operating procedure (SOP)," Soh said.

Soh said the government should now focus on the construction sites and quarters of foreign workers in

the yellow and red zones as they were the high-risk clusters.

"The most important thing is for all companies with foreign workers to follow the SOP set by the Health Ministry and authorities to minimise the risks," he said.

Master Builders Association of Malaysia (MBAM) president Foo Chek Lee said it was in full support of the implementation of the amendment, which it helped to draft years ago.

"A worker needs a good place to stay and rest.

"If they don't have proper rest, they can't work and if their living condition is not good, they will get sick and it affects productivity," he said.

Foo said big construction companies would not have problems to provide housing according to the guidelines.

He pointed out that some workers, however, were labourers who did not have permanent employment and chose to live in cramped conditions to save money.

"The main contractor and project owners are liable to provide proper accommodation to foreign workers.

"However, some sub-contractors may still resort to providing housing in the form of kongsi or hostel

but now they would have to follow the guidelines under the amendments," he said.

Foo, however, said the grace period was tight as it did not give much time for companies to prepare.

"But this is an extraordinary time with Covid-19, so companies will have to push and make it happen to safeguard public health," Foo added.

Real Estate and Housing Developers Association (Rehda) national council member Tony Khoo Boon Chuan said there was confusion on the ground as the detailed SOP was not available.

When asked on the ramification of the amendments, Khoo said the extra cost from providing housing, according to guidelines, would be transferred to home buyers eventually.

"This will result in more expensive houses and properties," he said.

Bina Puri Holdings group executive director Matthew Tee said although the amendments came at a cost, the industry would have to manage it.

"We try to follow the guidelines but all these implementations come at a cost, at a time when the construction sector is undergoing a recession," said Tee.