Land Use That Feeds the World: A Case for Sustainable Palm Oil

Speech by Datuk Mohamad Helmy Othman Basha, Group Managing Director of SD Guthrie and Chairman of Malaysian Palm Oil Board (MPOB) at World Climate Summit 2025 (COP30 - Belém, Brazil, 14 November 2025)

Good morning, ladies and gentlemen,

I am delighted to be here in Brazil, a new producer of one of the most important edible oils in the world – palm oil.

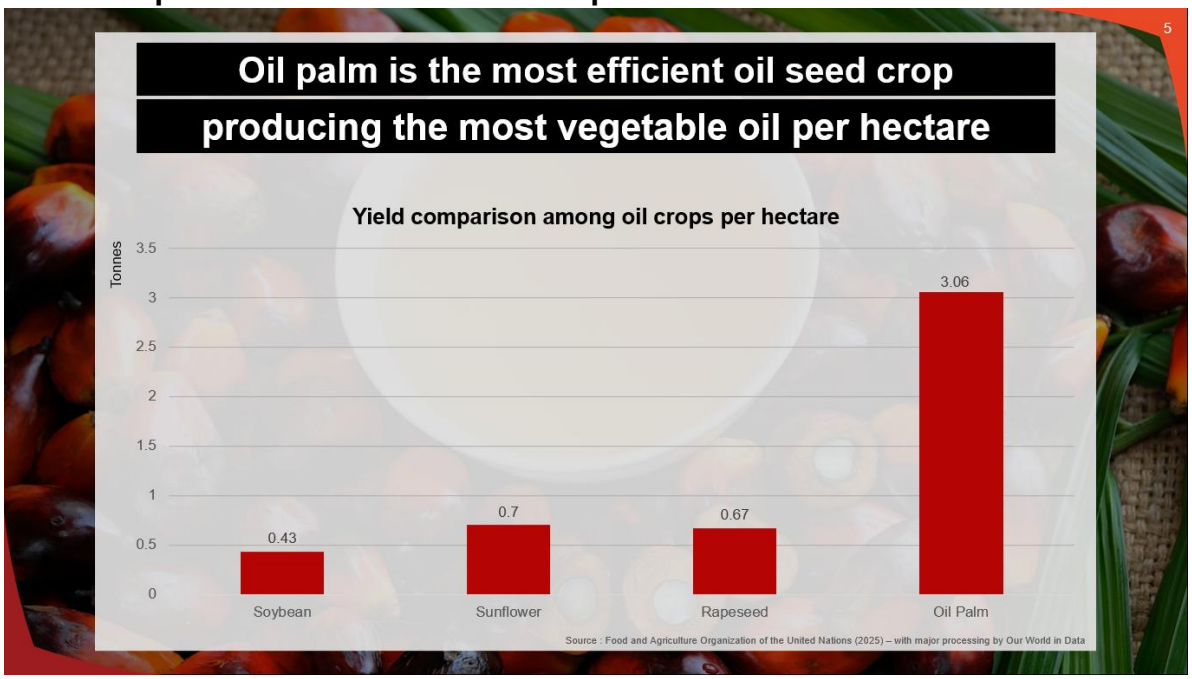
As an industry veteran myself, I can tell you that palm oil done right is a remarkable thing. If we want to use as little land as possible to get the maximum results, in the context of edible oils, the best solution is palm oil. You could say that I am a paid for spokesperson for the industry … and you'd be right. For that reason, I will let the facts speak for themselves. You can Google; you can ChatGPT; you can check everything I am going to tell you about Land Use to Feed the World.

I realise that some of you may not have heard of palm oil before today, or if you had, you heard the propaganda that goes with it. I use the word "propaganda", intentionally, because we have been told – for decades – that palm oil is a primary cause of deforestation and species extinction. This is propaganda because the facts clearly show that most human activity negatively impacts the planet ... but contrary to popular belief, palm oil is not one of the major culprits. It is a fact that the palm tree requires less land and less inputs to produce more oil, than all its competitors.

I work for a company called SD Guthrie, one of the world's largest producers of certified sustainable palm oil, or CSPO. We produce more than 2 million metric tonnes of CSPO every year and we have done so for more than a decade. That's about 12% of global CSPO supply.

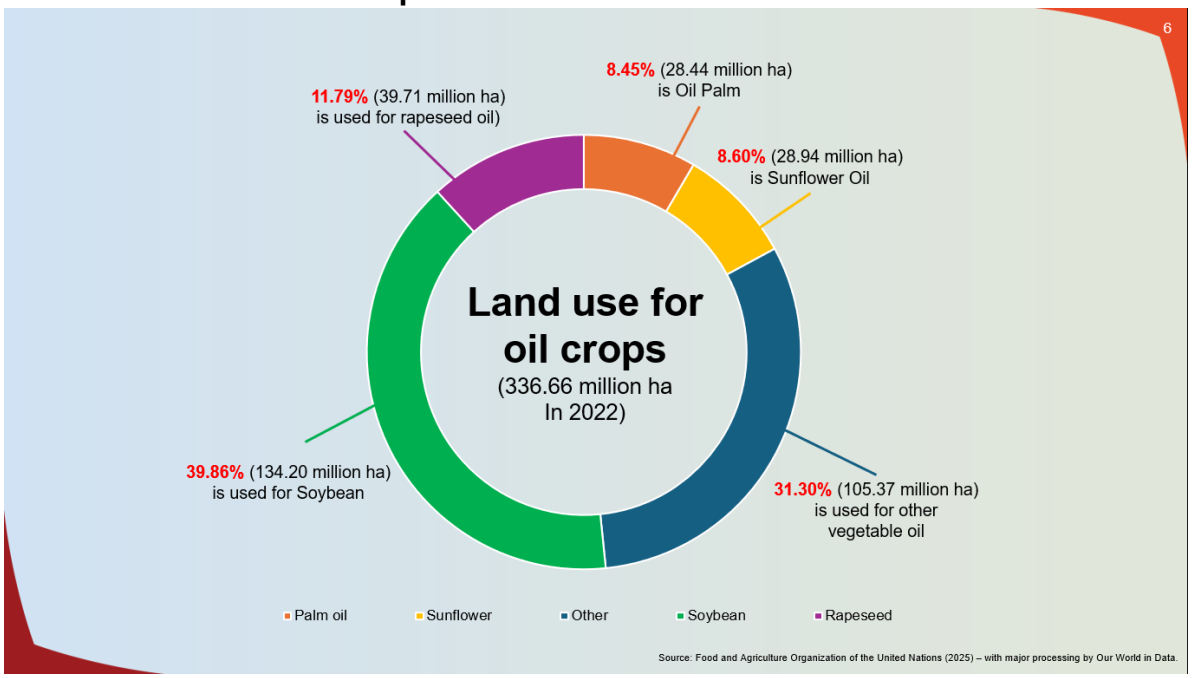
Guthrie has a planted hectarage of just over 560,000 ha, which is about two and a half times Brazil's total oil palm hectarage. So, Brazil … when we talk about using land responsibly to feed the world, the oil palm tree may well be a real solution for you.

Yield comparison of the world's oil crops



Let me explain why. This is from Our World in Data. The oil palm is between 4 and 10 times more productive per hectare than any other edible oil available in the world. Let's translate that into digestible numbers.

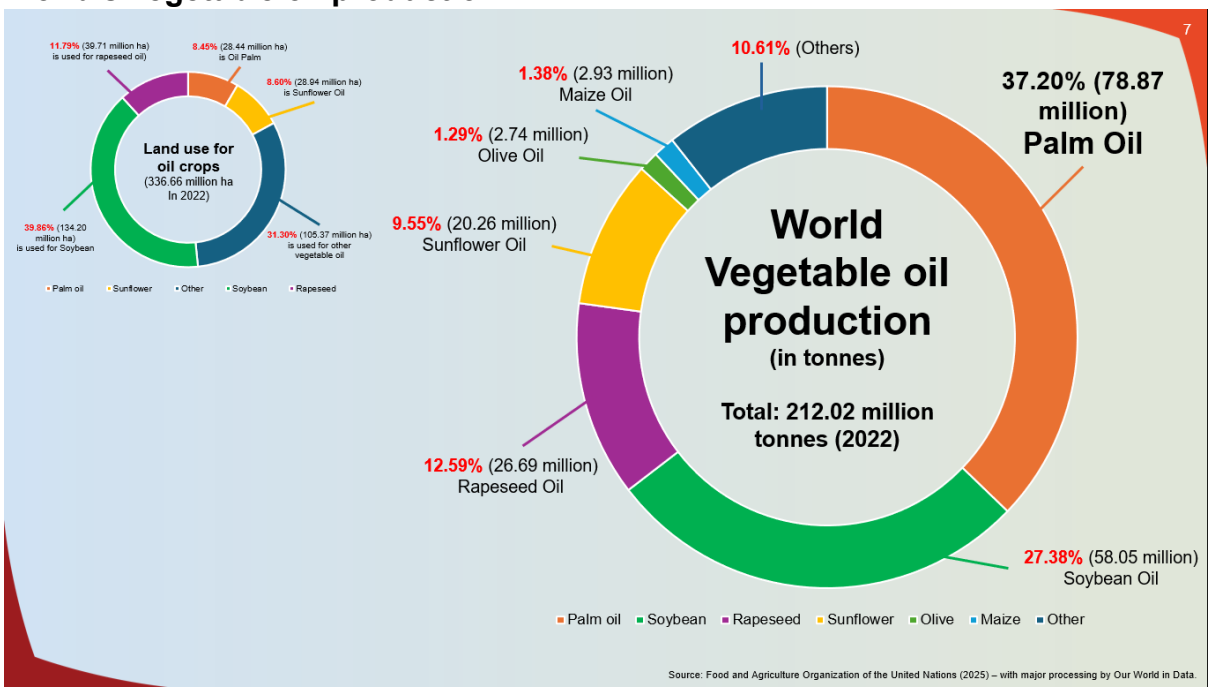
Global land use for oil crops



This is the total hectarage planted with oil palm in the world.

This is the total hectarage under soya cultivation. This is sunflower. And rapeseed….

World's vegetable oil production

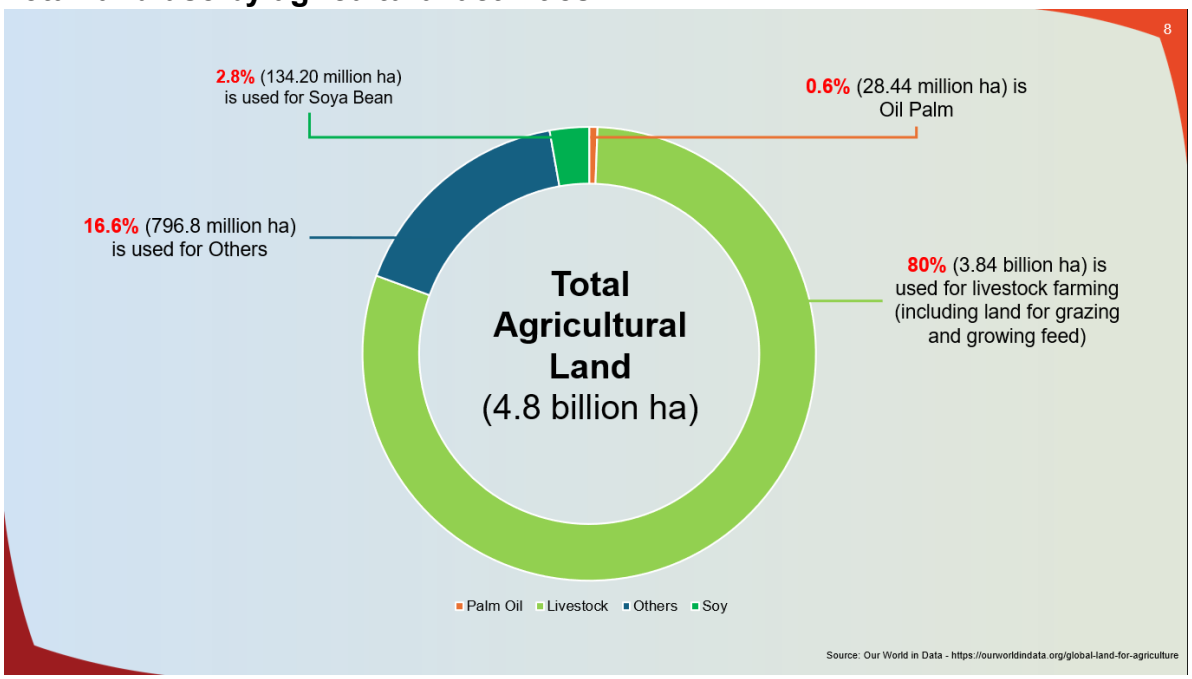


And this is how much palm oil is produced on this land.

And this is how much soya oil is produced. And corn. And sunflower. And rapeseed….

About 336 million hectares of land is planted with crops that produce edible oil. Of this, less than 10% or over 28 million hectares is planted with oil palm. But this 10% of land produces more than a third, or between 33 and 40 percent, of all edible oils in the world. That's about 75 to 80 million metric tonnes. Now, let's look at soybean – it occupies over 100 million hectares of land but produces less than 60 million metric tonnes of oil.

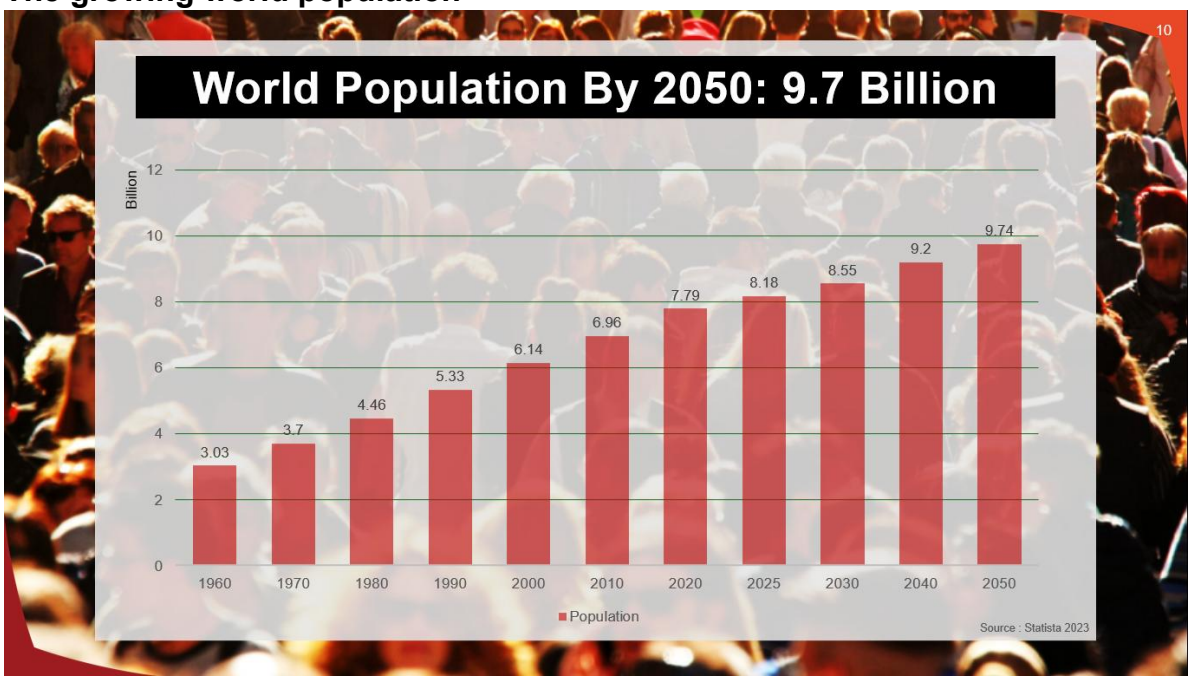
Total land use by agricultural activities



Now let's look at land use as a proportion of agricultural activity. That's livestock (point to big wedge), about 80% of total agricultural land or 4.8 billion hectares. The rest or about 960 million are for other agricultural activities including over 330 million hectares of land used for vegetable oil crop I mentioned earlier.

That's soybean … … and that line there, 0.6% of the world's total agricultural land, that's the oil palm. Let's digest these facts for a minute. Has forest been cleared to plant oil palm? Yes, of course it has. Is most forest clearing because of oil palm? Not at all. In fact, if anyone says that palm oil is the cause of deforestation, we must wonder at their motivations. Why are they saying something that is patently untrue.
But I'll get to that later.

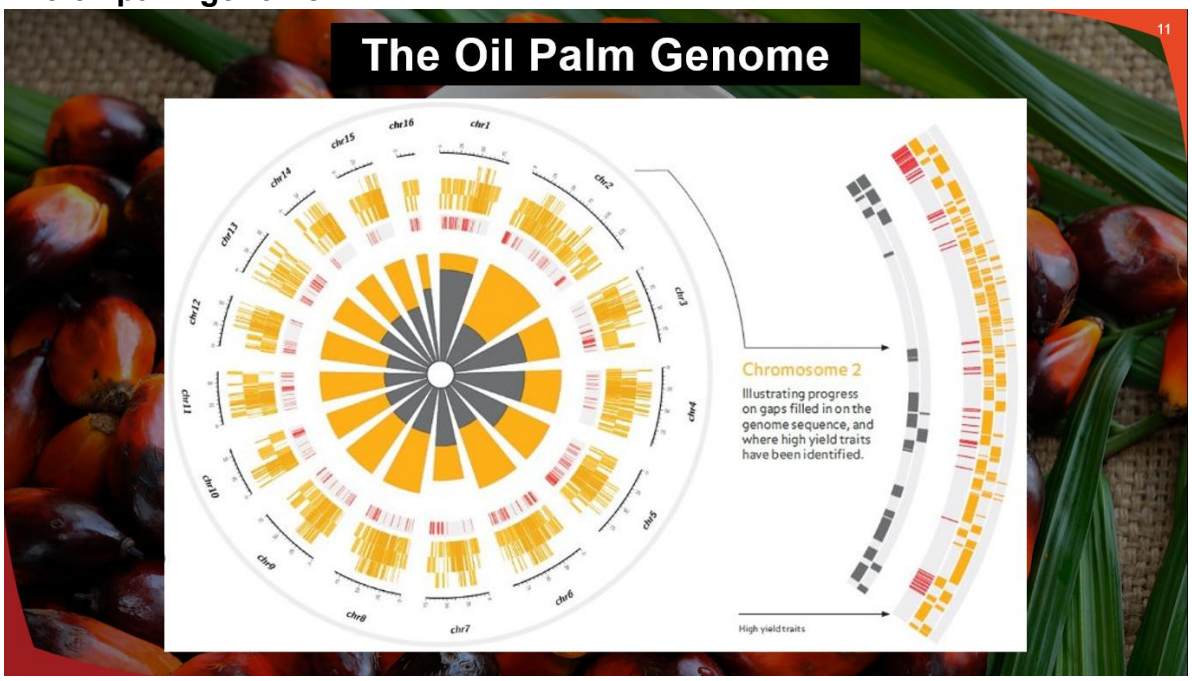
The growing world population



Ladies and Gentlemen, whether we like it or not, the world's population is still growing. And thus, the demand for food. It is projected that demand for edible oils and protein feedstock will rise by over 40% in the next two decades.

But the one thing that is not increasing is land. So, the question is: how do we feed a growing population without expanding our footprint? How can we make the world's most productive oil crop even better?

The oil palm genome



In 2023, we commercialised GenomeSelect® so that more growers can have access to our super-charged seeds. Every new generation of trees will bring more oil from the same land, without further land expansion.

Today's palm is so efficient, you could replant land used to grow other oil crops, produce more oil AND return some land to forest. Keep that thought in mind as I go to the next slide.

Palm oil is versatile and ubiquitous

We know that about 50% of supermarket shelves are stocked with products that use palm oil as an ingredient. Because, it is versatile, it is accessible, and it can be produced sustainably by smallholders or large companies.

What this means is that palm oil is a potential replacement for other edible oils. Could this be the reason for the well-funded campaigns that were waged against palm oil for years? Was this highly efficient and versatile tree singled out so that its competitors could do better?

We traced some of those campaigns and often found that there were powerful lobbies behind them. Lobbies that support competing commodities.

You can argue that lobbyists are entitled to fund campaigns and that these campaigns support legitimate causes.

Yes, deforestation is a legitimate cause, and it is a global problem. But here's the thing. When palm oil was condemned for decades as the primary cause of deforestation and for causing climate change, other commercial activities continued without hindrance. Other commodities with larger footprints were regarded as better for the planet. There was a time when even fossil fuels seemed better than palm oil.

These campaigns did a disservice to the planet, to humanity, because several ills were perpetuated. Until now… Until now when climate change has become catastrophic. These days, even the most strident critics of palm oil are admitting that, sustainably produced palm oil is actually a viable solution for this planet and its people.

The palm is a tree, and as such its carbon absorption capacity is higher than that of a shrub or a bush. As a tree, it is replanted once every 25 years, not every year like annual crops. As a tree, it bears fruits, and the oil it produces is from a fruit, just like coconuts, olives and avocados – unlike seed oils.

Beyond Zero

Ladies and gentlemen, in today's world, net zero and zero harm are no longer enough. We have to go beyond zero.

With our GenomeSelect® seeds, and our sustainability credentials honed over two decades, we at Guthrie have embraced the need for greater and faster change. This required a mindset shift – from “less or zero harm” to making “positive impacts”.

This commitment includes setting aside 100,000 hectares for conservation and restoration by 2030. About a fifth of our planted landbank. We are also working on a Regenerative Agriculture Framework with our partners.

As a perennial crop rather than cash crop, and unlike soya, rapeseed or sunflower, oil palm allows for a biodiverse coexistence, with natural corridors connecting wildlife habitats. If you want to know more, please come and visit our Carey Island plantation in Malaysia, where we have recorded over 60 species of birds.

But, even as we reduce our landbank, we expect to increase our yield. That is our commitment to sustainability. That is our commitment to responsible land use. And that is our commitment to future generations. All this is possible, because the crop we are working with is the oil palm tree.

Thank you.