The State's livestock industry is well protected from dangerous and infectious animal diseases, but not from thieves, and the problem is getting serious!

The concern was raised by Deputy Chief Minister and Agriculture and Food Industries Minister Datuk Yahya Hussin, when he found out the Department of Veterinary Services and Animal Industries' Buffalo Breeding and Research Centre here was also not spared from theft.

He was told that buffalo theft had been one of the problems faced in the 1,600-acre centre during a briefing held at its office, in conjunction with his visit on Thursday.

There are 200 plus buffaloes, as well as about 300 deer, presently being reared at the centre which is manned by 12 staff. This centre, the biggest of its kind in the country, opened in 1979.

"We are not so worried about the livestock disease because we do not have a history of serious buffalo diseases in Sabah, but it is thefts which are a worry because we have been hearing about this since long ago," he said.

"We have heard of villagers who rear buffaloes complaining about their buffaloes being stolen, either while the animals were let loose or in a closed area," he said, adding that even at the breeding and research centre there have been one or two cases of buffaloes being stolen.

"I was also made to understand that people including villagers are getting less and less interested in buying buffaloes, because of this rampant theft activity," he said.

He said the affected victims are also no longer interested to lodge police reports on buffalo thefts because "we continue hearing and know there are many buffalo theft cases but there is no record of it."

"We want the statistics of this so that an investigation can be carried out seriously and we are able to instill an understanding among the public... we need to work together on this, so as to solve this problem and revive the buffalo-rearing activity which used to be part of our people's culture," he said.

It was learnt that most of these thefts involved buffaloes reared by individuals or villagers, and only one or two cases a year involved livestock farmers registered under Dovsai's buffalo breeding scheme.

The department is also reported to have carried out a census on livestock animals in Sabah and is presently in the process of compiling the information into its databank, that would provide the latest statistics on livestock in the State.

On other developments, Yahya said the centre is currently doing a joint research with Universiti Putra Malaysia on the soil conditions within the research centre area so as to enable it to plan for expansion of the current activities as well as other suitable livestock development activities there.

There were 250 buffaloes at the centre for breeding, especially to provide studs to breeders in the State.

He said, the centre, which was opened in 1979, was the biggest breeding and research centre in the country. The centre focused on the breeding of local species such as Swamp Buffaloes, Riverine Buffaloes and Sulawesi Buffaloes.