

MOU SIGNING TO BENEFIT FARMERS



From left: Bank South Pacific Country Head Mr. Haroon Ali, Minister for Agriculture Hon. Dr. Mahendra Reddy, Permanent Secretary for Agriculture Mr. Ritesh Dass and CEO Agricultural Marketing Authority Mr. Alvin Sharma.

A Memorandum of Understanding that will provide farmers a digital based banking solution was signed last week by Fiji Agro Marketing Authority (AMA) and the Bank South Pacific (BSP).

The Minister for Agriculture, Waterways and Environment, Hon. Dr. Mahendra Reddy while officiating at

the signing applauded the initiatives of the two organisations describing it as 'a step to boosting the plans to modernize and commercialise agriculture'.

He said the Ministry of Agriculture in partnership with AMA had embarked on contracting farmers to focus their production on commercial endeavours.

"This agreement is a step further in materializing our objective of achieving a full-fledged commercial agriculture sector," said Dr. Reddy.

"Under the agreement, BSP will provide financial literacy training to the AMA contracted farmers at their regional locations and register farmers

for SMS banking services so that farmers living in regions with poor network connectivity can receive payment on their mobile phones."

Dr. Reddy said in addition, BSP would extend its services by providing soft loans to AMA and other exporters contracted farmers and existing suppliers.

He said the Ministry of Agriculture and AMA was not only focused to bring markets to farmers doorsteps but would continue to ensure farming was treated as a business and such packages would be identified to encourage proposed changes.

"Through this engagement we will increase the number of farmers who want to take up farming as a business to enable them to increase their productivity, income and profitability and at the same time improve and sustain their livelihood," said Dr. Reddy.

The BSP Country Head Haroon Ali commended the alliance saying that it formed an integral part of the financial inclusion strategy and would further enhance BSP's contribution to the Government's objective of National Financial Inclusion and a cashless society.

He said the Bank would also assist AMA to digitise their farmer payment processes and reduce security risks

associated with handling large sums of cash.

"With their card-based accounts, farmers are able to receive cash directly into their bank accounts from AMA and they can verify when payments have been received by using SMS or the BSP App to check their balances or view transaction history," explained Mr Ali.

"Farmers can then visit their rural post offices or their nearest ATM to withdraw cash. They can also swipe their Easy Cards at any local BSP EFTPOS terminal to pay for their shopping and withdraw cash."

"We are committed to working with the AMA to facilitate financial literacy workshops for farmers that include digital banking training to provide them with 24/7 access to their own bank accounts via SMS, online banking or the BSP mobile banking app," said Mr. Ali.

"Under the partnership, farmers would have a tailored savings account that allowed four free digital banking transactions monthly, no charges for monthly maintenance fees and access to BSP's 16 branches, 41 rural Postal Agencies, 2045 BSP EFTPOS terminals and 118 ATMs nationwide with the added benefit of SMS and Online banking."

CLUSTER APPLAUDS AMA



Lomaivuna Sector 6 cluster farmers.

The 'Future Depends Now' (FDN) Young Farmer's group of Sector Six in Lomaivuna are benefitting from the contractual and market access initiative of the Agriculture Marketing Authority of Fiji.

The initiative launched by the Minister for Agriculture Hon. Dr. Mahendra Reddy has opened doors of opportunities for the development of youth in Lomaivuna.

Their advisor Patricia Titifanua said the three-year contract would allow the eight-member young farmers group to continue to work together as a cluster.

"This contract farming will enable and motivate us to rise and lift our game from subsistence to large scale farming," she said.

"At this stage, it is all team work as a cluster. The older ones guiding the younger ones and we are all doing hands-on respectively, sharing knowl-

edge, ideas that will enhance our current production and measure same against our expenses," said Patricia.

"This opportunity will enable us to create employment within our families and community as a whole as per our draft working plans."

"For FDN Young Farmers, our vision is to keep striving to be Lomaivuna's Best in terms of quality, consistency and reputable root crop producers/suppliers to our contracts as well as Farm-to-Table for local markets."

The contract ensures the young farmers have a confirmed market in return the latter is to consistently supply root crops.

"Rewards earned will definitely motivate other farmers to be part of this initiative and AMA is taking the first step coming to our doorstep as a market instead of us going down to our municipal markets on nominated days,"

she said.

"We will continue to produce the demand of the markets and with this we believe that we will benefit as a whole in terms of food, financial security, sustainability, quality living, and to be more business minded farmers."

In addition, the FDN young farmers group have also signed up for the Fiji National Provident Fund Voluntary Membership Scheme.

"AMA has made this possible for us by registering with FPNP for voluntary membership. We are in agreement with AMA to deduct a portion of our revenue and pay to FPNP on our behalf towards our retirement savings which makes the whole work hassle-free," she said. *

"We are more than happy to say that AMA is playing a major role in realizing the importance of savings for our respective families own financial security and addressing other financial issues."

GOVERNMENT ADDRESSES IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON FOOD SECURITY



Participants at the Workshop at Tanoa Plaza Hotel, Suva.

Addressing and engaging in various ongoing food security and nutrition initiatives during this COVID-19 pandemic is a necessity.

This was addressed by the Chief Economist of the Ministry of Agriculture Sera Bose during the Food Security and Nutrition Implication on COVID 19 workshop recently held at the Tanoa Plaza Hotel in Suva.

The workshop facilitated dialogue on appropriate policy responses from Government and non-Government stakeholders aiming to address the current situation in the medium and long term.

"The combined impact of a global economic slowdown leading to recession, temporary loss of the tourism industry and a huge rise in unemployment has the potential to massively impact food security, nutrition and livelihoods in Fiji."

"We are here to better understand the implications of COVID-19 on food security and livelihoods and to listen to you about what the real impacts are in your areas of work and life," she said.

The workshop is in collaboration with the Ministry of Fisheries, the Fiji Food and Livestock Council (FCLC) and

the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO).

"We will map out the short and long-term impacts of COVID-19 on food security and nutrition from across the food system in Fiji and identify measures we can take to address them," she said.

In addition, the workshop focuses on supporting the main stakeholders of the Food Security and Nutrition industry to jointly analyze the current context with shared policy responses for the way forward.

"We would like to be informed by those most impacted so decisions that are taken are based on the real experiences of all people directly involved in the food system from farmers to vendors to exporters to food processors," said the Chief Economist.

The workshop also provided a forum for gaining common understanding the data and statistics available and measure gaps to ensure programs and decisions were evidence-based.

The activity which is supported by the FAO FIRST Programme, will also be held in the Western Division next week Thursday (24.9.20).