

## Ministry Continues Research on New Taro Variety



A Taro Leaf Blight Tolerant variety demo plot in Koronivia Research Station

Research into Introduction and Breeding for Resistance to Taro Leaf Blight (TLB) are being continuously conducted by the Ministry of Agriculture's Koronivia Research Station.

To address the short term measure for Fiji in building resilience to the dalo industry, two new dalo varieties that are taro leaf blight tolerant were introduced, and in 2015 screened, evaluated and released in July 2018 known as "Tarova Loa" and "Tarova

Vula", both of which are being continuously multiplied, distributed & reviewed to ensure it maintains its robust characteristics.

The new taro leaf blight tolerant varieties was made available through a collaboration between the Ministry of Agriculture, the Pacific Community (SPC) - Centre for Pacific Crops and Trees (CePaCT), Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) Treaty Benefit Sharing Project in the Pacific and Australian Aid. This is the lesson

learned from the Samoan TLB epidemic in 1993, it ensures that Fiji dalo farmers access available TLB tolerant varieties in the immediate term.

After more than 20 years, the Ministry, through its Agronomy Section within the Research Division has achieved success in taro breeding as part of the Taro Research & Development Program, in crossing local varieties with Asian varieties and other available tolerant varieties. This

is a medium to long term measure for Fiji.

Upon the release of these taro leaf blight tolerant varieties to farmers, it will allow farmers to multiply and distribute to other farmers to strengthen resilience to the dalo varieties against this taro disease that is present in Pacific Island Countries like Hawaii, the Federated States of Micronesia, Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, Guam, Northern Marianas, and Samoa. It can happen anytime and Fiji needs

to have contingency measures in place.

With Fiji currently exporting taro to lucrative markets such as New Zealand, Australia, Canada, United States, and Hawaii earning around \$22m annually, taro remains one of the most important crops in Fiji in terms of food and income security to farmers and had been one of the major export commodities over the years with a total production gross value of \$120million with 51,509 metric tonnes produced in 2019, a 5 percent increase from 2018.

Historically, the negative impacts of the leaf blight disease caused widespread devastation to the Samoan taro industry in 1993, affecting the country's food security, farmer's livelihoods, loss of taro genetic resources, and a total ban in taro export.

With Fiji being vulnerable to such diseases due to its location, climatic conditions, increasing trade, sea and air travel to other Pacific island countries, there is a high possibility of an occurrence of this disease in Fiji and the need to prepare and have plans in place to support the taro industry especially to the rising number of farmers who are directly involved is evident.

## Pioneer Farmers Praise Initiative



Minister for Agriculture Hon. Dr. Mahendra Reddy, PS Agriculture Mr. Ritesh Dass and AMA CEO Mr. Alvin Sharma with the pioneering farmers from Sabeto.

Pioneering contracted farmers of the Agricultural Marketing Authority (AMA) have heaped praise on the Fijian Government for the implementation of the initiative.

The Farmers Contracts program under the AMA was officially launched on Thursday 07th May in Masimasi, Sabeto in Nadi with fifteen pioneering farmers from around Sabeto signing up to be part of the program.

For 55-year-old Mr. Rajesh Kumar of Keoliya, Sabeto, signing up to be part of the contractual farming initiative of the AMA was an easy decision for him to make as it would greatly benefit him in his farm.

"I started farming at a very young age and this kind of agreement is a first for me," he said.

Mr. Kumar said he welcomed and gladly supported the initiative as it

would augur well for the farming community; "I am very happy to be a part of the contract farming and am also pleased that the AMA has partnered with the Ministry of Agriculture to promote and see that this initiative runs successfully for us farmers."

He has already set out his farming plan to ensure that he meets his obligations under the contract with the planting of 2-acres of bongo chilly, 2-acres of cassava as well as kumala.

Mr. Kumar's sentiments on the initiative was shared by Mr. Shri Ram also of Sabeto, who looked forward to harvesting his sugarcane just so he could set aside land to cultivate crops and vegetables.

Mr. Ram also signed up under the Contractual Farming program as it ensured that his produce had a set market; "Yes, I am very happy to be a part of the contract farming because

now I don't have to worry about my market and how I will get it to my buyer," he said.

"I plan on harvesting my sugarcane and will leave aside some land so I can plant cassava and bongo chilly to supply to the AMA," added Mr. Ram.

In addition, Mr. Sunil Prasad acknowledged the Ministry of Agriculture and the AMA for the continued support in ensuring farmers were a part of the program to increase their opportunities for improved livelihoods.

"For me, this is history, I am now 60-years-old and we are here, signing a contract to supply to the AMA, I am very thankful to the Minister for Agriculture Hon. Dr. Mahendra Reddy and the Ministry for the support to us farmers and I believe this will only benefit farmers in the country in the long run," said Mr. Prasad.

Meanwhile, Mr. Uday Narayan of Sabeto Central is looking forward to signing up for the initiative as he has been earmarked to be part of the next lot of farmers who will be offered contracts by the AMA.

"I think it looks promising and I take my hat off to the AMA and the Ministry of Agriculture for actively promoting it to farmers, this program to meet supply and demand looks really good and I know it will be good for the farmers," said Mr. Narayan.

"I'm looking forward to signing my farmer contract and to be a part of this initiative because this will only bring about positive returns to everyone involved," he added.

The Contractual Farming initiative of the AMA has so far garnered 43 signatories from interested farmers following its launch.

These farmers have signed

contractual agreements with the AMA to provide them with the quantity of the required produce, and the intervals at which the produce would be required at; as part of the contract agreement, a determined pricing range that will be paid to the farmers along with the AMA's and farmers obligations also stipulated in it.

AMA Chief Executive Officer Alvin Sharma said the organization had shown its commitment to its contracted farmers.

"We have now formally started the journey where we have committed to our contracted farmers that we will solve their 2 biggest problems – who will buy my produce and how will I take it there. We have gone a step further and made this commitment to them in writing," he said.

"In this first phase, 148-acres of land has been allocated to grow targeted produce such as Cassava, Kumala, Chillies, Dalo, Duruka, Baby Ginger, and Peanuts."

"The farmers are from the Nadole, Keoliya, Masimasi, and Nabatini regions of Sabeto. We will monitor these 43 farmers initially for a month or two before expanding and implementing the signing of farmer contracts in other areas," added Mr. Sharma.

According to Mr. Sharma, the AMA has received an overwhelming response nationwide as more farmers are willing to sign up with the AMA.

"We are holding this process as we wish to ensure that our preparatory processes such as seed distribution, land preparation, land husbandry processes, growing of produce, etc. are finetuned before we expand the scale of this program," said Mr. Sharma.