

Ministry Resumes Agriculture COVID-19 Response

The Ministry of Agriculture has resumed its Agriculture COVID-19 Response initiative today, Monday 04th May 2020.

This follows the two week suspension of the initiative due to Tropical Cyclone Harold in April, which caused widespread devastation to outer islands of the country as well as parts of Viti Levu who experienced the brunt of the cyclone.

Before its suspension, the Ministry recorded an overwhelming response to the initiative, as within just under a month of the programs introduction, 11,602 Home Gardening seed packages and 689 Farm Support packages were distributed across Fiji.

Additionally, a new initiative under the Home Gardening Initiative will be included as part of the Agriculture COVID-19 Response which specifically targets the corporate sector, tailor-made for affected employees.

While making the announcement recently, Minister for Agriculture Hon. Dr. Mahendra Reddy said that despite the distribution of such a large number of seed packages, there still remained a large number of households who were

interested in making full use of vacant land around their houses to grow their food.

"Since the launch of this Seed Package, we have received calls from the corporate sector to provide a specific number of packages for their employees who have lost jobs," he said.

"We wish to announce that we will re-package the existing home gardening seed package for these employees calling it as Corporate Employee Seed Package (CESP)," added Hon. Reddy.

Under the CESP program, corporate entities are required to inform the Ministry of Agriculture about the number of employees whose employment has been affected and where their office is located, and the Ministry will deliver the packages to the office and their employees can pick their packages from there.

The Home Gardening initiative targets those living in urban and peri-urban areas while the Farms Support program targets Fijians living in rural areas.



A Long bean plot sprouting at a farm in Bau Road, Tailevu.

Agricultural Marketing Authority Sets Out Six Month Plan



AMA Chief Executive Officer Mr. Alvin Sharma.

The Agricultural Marketing Authority (AMA) has revealed plans that will steer the organization towards a new direction.

AMA Chief Executive Officer, Alvin Sharma highlighted the six-month plan during a recent announcement to ensure agricultural growth and expansion in line with the Ministry of Agriculture's initiatives.

"This is a direction which seeks to make the AMA self-sustainable by May 2023, a direction which will ensure that the AMA pays out a dividend to the Government of Fiji for the first time ever since its inception in 2004."

In collaboration with the Ministry of Agriculture, the Agricultural Marketing Authority will be conducting a thorough review of its

business processes to re-align to the strategic direction.

Additionally, the AMA, as part of the review process to align to modern International Financial Reporting Standards and generally accepted accounting principles, has initiated a closed tender, with the appointment of a reputable accounting firm to conduct the comprehensive review.

"This is the start of a process for the AMA to realize its true potential, and become a fully-fledged statutory body," he said.

"At the same time, we have realized that our current supply chain management systems are unstructured and volatile at present."

This he said was prone to multiple shocks, and as an example, whereby the farm to market costs were increased due to mobility issues.

"In the last couple of weeks, the AMA has received a large influx of new orders where we have faced multiple challenges in fully delivering on these orders," he said.

"We have realized that if we are to truly grow our business then we need

to take more control of our supply chain management system and ensure that it is a structured and sustainable model."

"We have realized that if we need to increase the number of farmers out there, Fiji wide, then we need to solve their two biggest questions: "Who will buy my product", and "How will I take it to the market?"

The Agricultural Marketing Authority of Fiji assists producers of agro-produce on marketing of their products, identifying markets, facilitating and developing the marketing of agro-produce and export and import agro-produces.

As part of this new strategic direction, the AMA will implement Farmers Contracts to its current and potential suppliers whereby a written contract will be provided to farmers for a 3-year-period.

The contract will define the quantity of produce required, the intervals for which the produce will be required at, a determined pricing range paid out to farmers and the obligations of the AMA and the respective farmer.



Staff of AMA serving farmers during the COVID-19 lockdown.

MUCUNA: Soils Best Friend



Matured Mucuna seeds on plant.

Maintaining the soil's natural ability to sustain agricultural plant growth is critical for consistent yields of high-quality produce.

However, due to the dependency and excessive use of fertilizers on farms, coupled with the continuous use of the same land for agriculture, soil fertility has been greatly impacted.

Thankfully though, farmers can now have a high chance of improving crop production with the introduction of the leguminous annual green manure cover crop, Mucuna beans.

There are five known species of Mucuna, from which two species were introduced into the country while three

species are native to Fiji and can only be grown from seeds and cannot be reproduced vegetatively.

Farmers who are experiencing difficulties with degraded soil can now rely on the 'magic Mucuna beans' for soil structure improvement.

Mucuna adds nitrogen to the soil and maintains soil fertility and draws up phosphorous from the soil making it available for plants.

Sometimes the use of excessive chemicals and fertilizers on a farm deteriorates the soil structure, however, Mucuna is used as green manure and an inexpensive source of organic fertilizer.

The seeds of Mucuna beans germinate easily and the plant smothers the weeds, controls parasitic nematodes, and increases the earthworm population in the soil and can be used as a cover crop for fallow.

Once planted, the mucuna fallow crop, which is a creeper plant will grow for approximately 6 months before decaying and replenishing the soil nutrient content, adding nitrogen to the soil and improving soil conditions, soil porosity, and soil structure, all very important factors to ensure improved production.

Mucuna seeds are planted at 1.5m spacing and can germinate within 5 to 7 days. Each plant should be staked and trellised for seed production purposes. Farmers can expect to harvest pods at 5 months. The number of pods in a bunch ranges from 4 to 27 pods and each pod can contain a range of 1 to 7 seeds.

The Ministry of Agriculture's Research Division had conducted trials on the effects of Mucuna green manuring on vegetable yields with results indicating that the Mucuna fallow offered benefits for sustainable crop production, and could help farmers increase their yield, and in turn profit margins, while also reducing weed numbers.

Bua Farmers Receive Hand-held Tractors

Rice farmer clusters of Vunivau, Korokadi, and Bakale in Bua have received one hand-held tractor each from the Ministry of Agriculture to assist them in their rice cultivation and production.

While handing over the hand-held tractors to the three farming groups last week, Minister for Agriculture, Hon. Dr. Mahendra Reddy said the assistance was to be used to increase rice production and improve the livelihood of the farmers.

"The entire country has now realized the importance of agriculture with people being laid off from work and having reduced working hours, they are now turning to farming, and through such assistance, we want you to know that the entire country has realized the agriculture sector's importance," he said.

Hon. Reddy said some countries are worried about their food security when there is no economic activity but Fiji is much secure in terms of food security.

"We import 80 percent of our rice from Vietnam and the rest from Thailand as it is very expensive and

that is the reason we are promoting rice to become 100 percent self-sufficient in rice in a couple of years," said Hon. Reddy.

Farmers were informed that the Ministry of Agriculture would be providing rice seeds to non-rice farmers for a quarter-acre with Fiji Rice Limited to purchase the rice.

Meanwhile, Agricultural Marketing Authority Chief Executive Officer, Alvin Sharma advised farmers to diversify their production system to increase their farm income.

Mr. Sharma requested the farmers to plant more uro-ni vonu dalo variety, yellow cassava dalo, duruka, pulses, and turmeric as there are markets for this commodity.

He also shared the AMA's development plans with the farmers stating: "We have come up with a concept called farmer-contracts, these documents will be finished in a fortnight."

The AMA is looking to introduce contractual farming for its current and potential suppliers as part of its new programs.