



BACK TO RURAL AGRICULTURE (B2RA) PROGRAMME LAUNCHED



Minister for Agriculture, Waterways and Environment Hon. Dr. Mahendra Reddy during the launch of Back to Rural Agriculture program at MoA conference room in Raiwaqa.

Fijians, whose livelihoods were impacted by COVID-19 through loss of employment and have opted to return to their villages to take up farming are set to benefit from a newly launched agriculture program.

The program, 'Back To Rural Agriculture' (B2RA), which was announced by the Minister for Agriculture, Waterways and Environment Hon. Dr. Mahendra Reddy this week will target 330 individuals who have since taken up crop and vegetable farming following their recent unemployment status.

"I am pleased to announce that the Ministry of Agriculture is launching the "Back to Rural Agriculture" (B2RA) program. This program aims to support Fijians who have lost their jobs due to the current pandemic and are now returning to the rural area to focus on agriculture."

"To reinforce their settlement support and to develop the agricultural entrepreneurship of these individuals, the Ministry of Agriculture will commence by providing them an initial farm support kit, which will help them

commence their farming activity," said Hon. Reddy.

The program is set out as targeted intervention, with a long-term development aim to see the increase in rural vitality via continued co-operation between these returnee farmers, the Ministry of Agriculture and rural communities.

"As a startup, the program will include a total package of \$400.00 per individual, which would consist of \$250 worth of farming tools, directly delivered to the successful farmer, \$100 worth of planting materials and \$50.00 cash, which can be used to procure any other items needed," said Minister Reddy.

The toolkit will include one farm knife, a digging fork, one digging spade, a 20L water bucket, one Jerry Can (Water Can), an axe, one 50 meter rope, a tarpaulin set, and one set of shade cloth.

Planting materials will also be distributed in addition to the above equipment, based on individual requirement and land suitability.

Minister Reddy emphasized that the

programme was tailored for those who wanted to venture into agriculture after having lost their jobs due to the current pandemic, stressing that it would only be provided to those meeting the criteria in full.

To apply for the program, interested individuals will be expected to provide the following information to substantiate the selection:

- Evidence of loss of job due to COVID-19 (letter from the company, etc.) and no other alternative sources of income for the family;

- Applicant should have land readily available, at least 5 acres with supporting documents;

- Applicant must be an aspiring crop farmer with the intention to take on full-time farming as a core activity, and;

- If the farm is located in a rural village setting, a supporting letter from the community leader is to be provided.

The first phase of this program started on 1st July and ends on 8th July. The link for the online application form is available on the Ministry of Agriculture Facebook and Twitter pages.

SWAPPING GEARS: FROM THE SEA TO THE LAND

The choice to delve into farming was one which experienced seaman Fonua Kotobalavu had to make for the benefit of his family.

With the scent of the sea still fresh on his skin, the 52-year-old Namuka-i-Lau native reached this decision to develop the land under the family name to help his family.

Those who know Fonua will attest to his love for the sea as he has been a fisherman for more than 30 years, with the Vatu-i-Ra passage being one of his favorite fishing grounds.

Due to COVID-19 Mr. Kotobalavu reflected on his life choices and chose to take up a new calling, "Because of COVID-19 I thought hard about the situation and that was when I sold my boat engine which I use to fish and decided to cultivate the land fully," he said.

The energetic man returned to the family's 33-acre Wainibau farm in Lodonu to continue cultivating the family's coffee farm of 4 years.

"It was decided in one of our family meetings years back as our long term initiative that we plant something different from what everyone is planting and the idea of coffee popped up," said Fonua.

To date, the family has a total of 4,000 coffee plants and have dived deep into cultivating the plant with vigor and dedication.

"Because the sea was and had always been my source of employment, I was an amateur in farming but through the communal way of working with my family, we maintain the coffee farm in Tailevu."

And because Fonua has found his niche in the land, he has extended his newfound hobby of farming to their 3.5-acre land in Savura Road, Wailoku.

The piece of land in Wailoku which was sold to his mother, Maraia Luisa Dacey, has been a bevy of farming, as the backyard is flooded with vegetables.

"The land behind the house is vacant and with this pandemic, one thing we have in abundance is time and toiling the backyard has been an activity we engage in to spend most of our time in," he said.

"We have a wide range of assorted vegetables planted here to help feed our extended family and some of it is also sold to help in feeding the public," he shared.

Practice makes perfect as the father of three continues to see wonders the land is offering when he pays attention to it.

"Our home vegetable farm is organic and we will keep it that way considering the maintenance of soil fertility and the health of the people that will consume the vegetables," he said.

"We are often challenged by the sizes of vegetables sprayed with fertilizers but we are not swayed to ever try it."

Apart from not practicing slash and burn, most of the farming practices he implements on the farm are experimental and was taken from the internet, while the rest are best practices from the various farms he has visited since taking up farming.

His family has been his pillar of strength, they have assisted him on the Wailoku farm and through their support, he knows the decision he made to concentrate his efforts on toiling the land was the right one.

"Because of the restriction of movement, we have been focusing on this vegetable farm in Wailoku with our other family members in Tailevu looking after our coffee farm," he said.

"Our daily routine here in Wailoku is spent in our backyard, tending to our compost and our vegetables and because we have expanded our vegetable garden, we are also expanding our compost heap to have it on rotation and we are also using the river that runs alongside the farm for irrigation and

natural pest control methods."

Ideas of how to run the organic vegetable farm is a process of trial and error as Fonua and his family set out their farming plans to help them survive during the COVID-19 pandemic.

"I am grateful that COVID has

given me the opportunity to look at other ways to feed my family and that is to toil the land," said Fonua.

"Being comfortable with the sea, it never occurred to me that there is a lot the land offers on farming and there are methods to still have food should there

be a storm or sunshine."

Fonua Kotobalavu is also a recipient of the recent Home Gardening vegetable seed package of the Ministry of Agriculture.



Fonua's vegetable garden in Wailoku.



Fonua Kotobalavu tending to his new coffee plants.