



## AGRICULTURE SECTOR READY FOR THE NEXT LEVEL: DASS

Outgoing Ministry of Agriculture Permanent Secretary, Mr Ritesh Dass left the Ministry officially yesterday (1.10.21) confident the sector was ready to move to the next level, despite the single biggest challenge brought on by COVID-19.

Just before his departure from the Ministry, Mr Dass who has taken up his new job as the CEO of Basic Industries Limited, a subsidiary of Fijian Holdings Limited, termed his two years in the public sector as 'unmatched' with his 20 plus years in the private sector.

"I can certainly say that these two years will remain unmatched against time I spent anywhere else, by the entire working career that I have had and possibly that I will have going forward. Whilst I am excited by the new challenge that I am moving to, I am sad that I will be leaving team Agriculture. I will be cheering them from the sidelines and providing necessary support as much as I can, as we are now one family; I've learnt so much and have made many friends along the way and it's difficult to say goodbye and just move on," he said.

Mr. Dass said the agriculture sector had progressed significantly, despite the challenges with consistent growth recorded in terms of production and export revenues earned with the trend expected to continue this year.

However, he added, there was a lot of focus on building the fundamentals and getting the basics right including unlocking the potential of the Ministry's human resources.

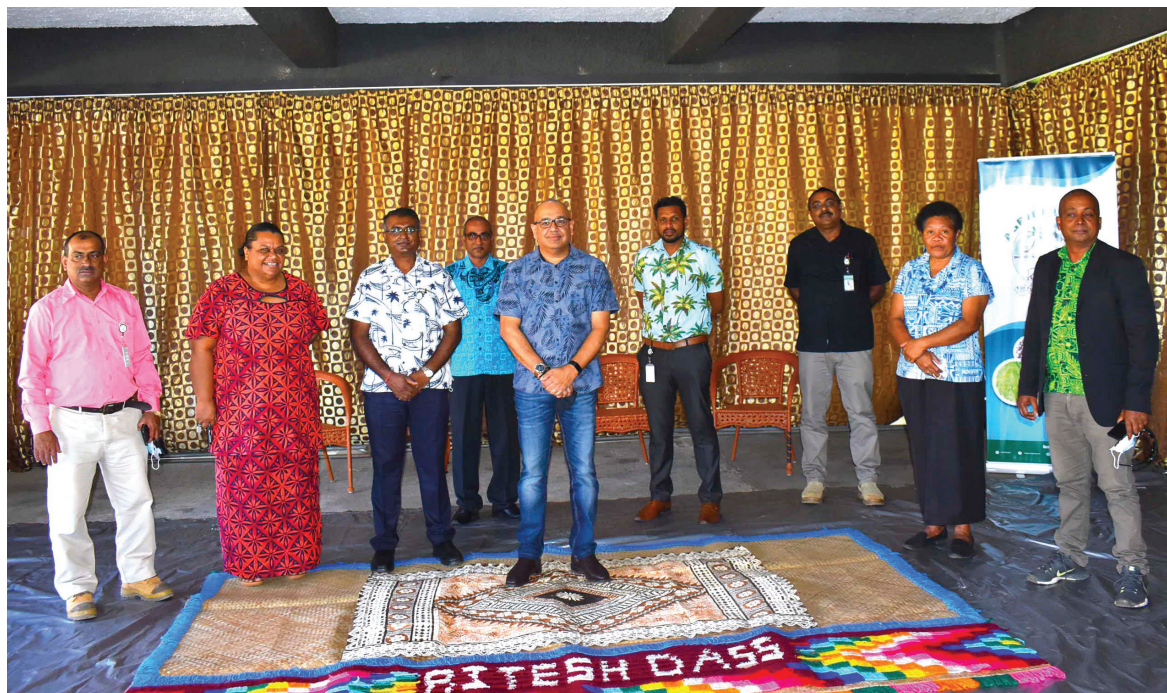
"I believe we are at a juncture where we can accelerate our journey of growth and take it to the next level. We have this mantra of 'Grow Beyond' and I have seen that happening not only in terms of our KPI's and deliverables, but also what I consider the most important element – the growth in our people, the growth in their capability," he said.

It's an energised culture, it's an energised environment and for me that is the most refreshing thing when you see driven, passionate and happy people going that extra mile each day, striving to do what they are supposed to do."

He said whilst COVID resulted in the delay of implementing capital programs, the silver lining was that everyone realized the importance of agriculture from the elevated level of interest by local Fijians to even offshore investors interested in investing in the sector.

"It's about us unlocking our full potential, releasing under-utilized arable land for productive purposes, putting all the resources to upscale our activities and modernizing the way we do agriculture in Fiji."

Mr. Dass continued to encourage



Former PS Agriculture Mr. Ritesh Dass (middle) with Senior Officials of the Ministry of Agriculture.

officers in the Ministry to give their best and challenged them to strive to leave behind a legacy that their children, grandchildren, and their families could be proud of.

"Any organization is as good as its

people, and I think we've got genuine people, a genuine team, really wanting to do their best. So, the message to the people, when you wake up in the morning think about what is it that you want to be known for – get to work, give

your 100 percent and create that moment that you can be proud of. If everybody comes with that mindset, we will be able to achieve magic."

## COVID-19 DOES LITTLE TO DETER AGRICULTURE ACHIEVEMENTS ON LAKEBA

Recognizing the agriculture endeavours of your very own goes a long way in motivating one's own community.

This was the case for a Mataqali (land-owning unit) on Lakeba Island, in Lau who held an awards ceremony to recognize the agricultural prowess and achievements of outstanding members of their mataqali, all this despite and amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, which is yet another successful agriculture-promotion story in itself.

At Yadrana Village, villagers recently held the 'Babunia Mini-Agriculture Show' on August 22. Babunia is the name of the Mataqali whose members make up the majority of Yadrana Village. The Mini AgShow was the first of its kind to be held there.

Event Committee Chairman and

Lakeba District Rep to the Lau Provincial Council, Mr Uate Soko explained in i-Taukei that the reason they decided to hold the event was to show what they could still achieve despite these challenging times.

He said the women from the Mataqali, as well as the women generally from Lakeba, were the major suppliers of mats and tapa that were ordered on the Facebook platform called 'Veivoli Va Kawa I-Taukei', a social media platform established to conduct trade on valuable i-Taukei artifacts and items.

Therefore, on 'Babunia Day' the women showed off their skills of beautifully hand-woven mats and were deservedly recognized for their efforts including the men for their crop planting.

The awards that were up for grabs included 'Yaqona Farmer of the Year' won by Jone Salabogi, 50, who has a total of 4,500 plants in various stages of growth up to three years. 'Yaqona Progressive Farmer of the Year' went to Jone Maukakala, 59, who has 4,000 plants with the same growth rate. 'Second Runner Up' in the 'Yaqona Progressive Farmer of the Year' category, went to Kelera Ledua, 40, with 3,400 plants.

The 'Young Farmer of the Year' was awarded to 15-year-old Uate Soko Jr, who has a total of 1,300 yaqona plants. Meanwhile 'Voivoi Producer of the Year' went to Ana Fane, 67, who has 8,000 plants.

The Ministry of Agriculture provided the trophies and certificates for the Awards ceremony. Earlier in 2017, under the Rural and Outer Island program, the Ministry built a processing shed that cost \$18,000 for mat-weaving and tapa-making for the women.

The men, on the other hand, after the devastation caused by TC Winston re-started Yaqona planting in 2017 after three decades of not planting Yaqona at all. The Ministry provided advice and encouraged the men to re-start planting, and from that time till today, yaqona farms are a normal sight all over the island.

Today, Lakeba boasts four yaqona clusters including youths. The island has eight villages with a population of 1,499; 386 households; and 425 farmers.



Kelera Ledua - 2nd runner up Yaqona Progressive Farmer of the Year.



Jone Maukakala - Yaqona Progressive Farmer.



Jone Salabogi - Yaqona Farmer of the Year.



Ana Fane - Voivoi Producer of the Year.



Uate Soko Jr. - Young Farmer of the Year.

## 8,600 REGISTER INTEREST FOR NEW AGRICULTURE PROGRAMS

Close to 8,600 online applications have been received by the Ministry of Agriculture for the new programs recently announced by the Minister of Agriculture, Waterways and Environment, Hon. Dr. Mahendra Reddy.

Agriculture Acting Permanent Secretary, Dr. Vinesh Kumar said nine of the ten programs were open for three weeks from August 20 to September 10.

"When applications closed, we had received a total of 8,483 online forms together with the required documents which included a copy of farmer's ID card, vaccination card, and evidence of land tenure status. The nine programs were Fencing Kits, Hydroponic System, Intensive Dairy Farming, Irrigation Kit, Land Clearing, Orchard Development, Protected Agriculture, Small Farming Equipment, and Women in Agriculture," he explained.

"The program that received the most interest was the Small Farming

Equipment where 3,106 applications were received. Fencing kits was next in line with 1,466 applications, followed by Land Clearing with 1,208 applications. In essence, we were inundated with applications for all these programs, which showed that more Fijians are interested in agriculture," he said.

The Permanent Secretary said the final program – Commercial Farmers Equity Package (CFEP) received a total of 59 applications after it closed in mid-September. CFEP, Dr. Kumar said, targeted commercial farmers and agro-processors who needed equity assistance when applying for Fiji Development Bank commercial agriculture loan.

Dr. Kumar explained the team was in the process of verifying details of applicants.

Decision will be made known to successful applicants following field verification.



Hydroponic farming practice.