

Ministerial Statement

Minister of Agriculture, Forestry Fisheries Rural Transformation, Industry and Labour

Mr. Speaker, I rise to make this statement to detail several significant developments within the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, Fisheries, Rural Transformation, Industry and Labour over the past two months. I am duty bound, within the context that our world is fighting one of its most monumental challenges to human civilization in recorded history, to update our Parliament and our nation on our successes and challenges.

Mr. Speaker, in the interest of clarity, I have categorized several thematic areas for this statement, namely:

1. Food security initiatives in response to the impact of COVID 19;
2. The status of the implementation of the Agriculture stimulus package;
3. The 2020 drought impact, assessment and mitigation responses;
4. Progress, challenges and prospects in establishing modern medicinal industry and the impact of COVID 19 on the process; and
5. The Canadian Farm Workers Initiative and resultant modifications due to COVID 19.

I will begin Mr. Speaker with, Food security initiatives in response to the impact of COVID 19.

On June 16th, 2013 St. Vincent and the Grenadines was recognised by the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) for our fight in reducing hunger and undernourishment. In fact, St. Vincent and the Grenadines received two awards:

1. The achievement of Millennium Development Goal (1), which was to halve the proportion of hunger and undernourishment between 1990-92 and 2010-2012; and
2. The more stringent World Food Summit goal set in 1996.

This was a significant reflection of an overall reduction of indigence nationally. The government has since embarked on a further quest to Zero Hunger, as articulated in our pledge to achieve Sustainable Development Goal number two (2) – which is to “Zero Hunger”. The establishment of the Zero Hunger Trust Fund has created an innovative model to address the issue of the reduction of hunger. I thank today the Zero Hunger Trust Fund for the contribution of 200 vouchers to farmers valued at \$500 each, and \$15,000 to assist with direct support of food supplies to several vulnerable families.

This Government and this Parliament through the establishment of a Parliamentary Front Against Hunger - the first English Speaking country to do so in the Caribbean and Latin American region, has made a commitment to fight hunger and undernourishment. Today, COVID 19 in all of its dimensions, has made large percentages of populations globally generally more vulnerable, and specifically, has made food accessibility and affordability issues of first importance in addressing the impact of COVID 19. Simply, all around the world, as a result of the COVID 19 triggered economic downturn many families have become vulnerable.

A national food supply chain has been established to assist vulnerable families with food supply packages. In St. Vincent and the Grenadines four (4) buying depots have become operational in:

1. Langley Park;
2. Lauders;
3. La Croix; and
4. Rose Bank.

A fifth buying will be functional by the end of this week at Rillan Hill. Thus far, 5000 boxes of 100% locally produced food, bought from over 370 farmers have been distributed through Churches, Community Based and Non-Governmental Organizations, and the Ministries of National Mobilization, Education, Health and Agriculture. 3,500 families have benefited nationwide.

On the economic side, the farmers are receiving good prices; farm workers are employed; timely payments are made; truckers are transporting; persons have been employed to facilitate grading and packaging; boxes are being sourced locally. I take this opportunity to thank the non-governmental organisations for volunteering. The Churches continue to play a critical role. This programme will continue to benefit our people in various forms in years to come.

- The region and the world is watching! They are seeing a carefully crafted, planned, structured and conceived initiative that will assist the vulnerable.

Mr. Speaker, permit me to share a letter received from Eve Crowley, Deputy Regional Representative at the Food and Agriculture's regional office for Latin America and the Caribbean. These were here words:

“Dear Minister Caesar,

Thank you for agreeing to participate in the FAO/WHO International Workshop on Fruit and Vegetables. Your Love Box Initiative has not gone unnoticed. At a time when countries are challenged to find ways to ensure that vulnerable households have access to fresh and healthy foods, when family farmers and local economies are under threat, and when supply chains are disrupted or uncertain as a result of COVID 19, innovative initiatives, such as the Love Box initiative, help to support food security for all, from farmers to consumers.

While this promises to provide a win-win solution at this time of crisis, we also know that facilitating poor consumer’s direct access to farm fresh fruits and vegetables can also be an important long term strategy to improve nutrition and reduce the risks of obesity and overweight.

We hope that you will be able to present this initiative internationally at the aforementioned workshop, and share insights on how public policies can best enhance fruit and vegetable consumption and improve fruit and vegetable value chains.

We have no doubt that the Love Box will inspire other policy makers internationally, including other SIDS countries, as we move towards the International Year of Fruits and Vegetables 2021.

We look forward to learning more from you in the near future.

Kind regards,

Eve Crowley”

My friends in Costa Rica, Chile and Argentina are in love with what they call in Spanish - “Caja de amor” – literally meaning ‘Box of Love.’

The Government wishes to assure all citizens, that the Ministry of Agriculture holds fast to the principles espoused in an appreciation of its mission statement that food security, food safety and food sovereignty are fundamental precepts for life and living in St. Vincent and the Grenadines.

The Farmers’ Support Company (FSC) remains committed to serving the farmers and fishers of St. Vincent and the Grenadines. As a result the FSC has made the following available at 100% financing:

- Purchasing of inputs at 50% discount;
- Tractor services at 50% discount;
- Purchasing of feeds at 50% discount;
- Purchasing of fishing gears at 50% discount; and
- A 7 years repayment period for the purchasing of boats valued at \$70,000.00 at an interest rate of 0% from the FSC.

At this time of global disruptions in the international food supply chains every single nation on earth is impacted. Our island’s food import supply chain does not exist in isolation, neither is our food export supply chain independent of global interconnectivities and linkages.

At this moment of general global uncertainties in food distribution, St. Vincent and the Grenadines is called to redouble its efforts, as a food producing nation, targeting local consumption, intra–regional and regional export and the servicing of extra-regional markets.

Mr. Speaker, I wish to recognize the efforts of two entrepreneurs, for their modeling of a system of boxes of food delivered for purchase. The Ministry of Agriculture will provide support with data and other logistics. Further, I thank the secretariats of the OECS and CARICOM for allowing their excellent technicians to assist us. The FAO and IICA have always been there for us.

Thanks to colleague Ministers who have worked to ensure that even though borders were closed – goods from St. Vincent and the Grenadines were not locked out.

Both the Minister of Agriculture and Food Security of Barbados – Hon. Indar Weir and Hon. Clarence Ramharat – Minister of Agriculture, Lands and Fisheries of Trinidad and Tobago went beyond the call of duty to assist our people.

Mr. Speaker, I now turn to the Status of the implementation of the Agriculture stimulus package with forecasting to March 2021.

The creation of the St. Vincent and the Grenadines' COVID 19 Food Security and Livelihood Impact Mitigation Initiative, is a critical element of the Government's multifaceted response to the unfolding Corona virus pandemic.

The overarching goal is to continue to alleviate the direct negative economic impact to stakeholders through the provision of support to farmers and farmworkers, agro-processors and fishers to:

1. Maintain the nation's food security by ensuring the continuity of food production;
2. Sustain smallholder farmers' and fishers' livelihoods;

3. Increase the productive capacity to take advantage of potential strategic investments as the opportunities emerge, to safeguard existing markets, to compete effectively in future global markets, and to reduce the food import bill.

The program comprises of the following:

1. Producers' Care Program – This refers to the 'Love Box' initiative and the soon to be established 'Care Packages' plan which will focus on backyard gardening.
2. Small Fisher Fleet Expansion – the advertisement for tender I am advised has been completed;
3. Fishing gear – the distribution will begin in the upcoming week.
4. Fertiliser -Inputs And Other Implements – a shipment of 4,000 sacks is expected by the end of the month to June.
5. Seeds And Seedlings 200,000 vegetable seedlings already distributed; 40,000 pineapple plants, 1,000 citrus and 5,000 Ackee now ready for farmers;
6. Animal Distribution (Livestock Revolving Program);
7. Tractor Service (Land Preparation Equipment Services) – has started;
8. Sea moss industry support is a priority; and
9. Poultry assistance will be available starting from next week

Mr. Speaker, I now turn to the 2020 drought impact, assessment and mitigation response

St. Vincent and the Grenadines was affected this year by one of the worst droughts experienced in the last 50 years. A national drought assessment impact will be compiled in a week.

The reality is that the Government has put in place a stimulus package to assist farmers grappling with the vagaries of the Covid 19 pandemic. Amid addressing this health crisis, the country was affected by the worst drought in decades. All these are being addressed against the backdrop that June 1 was the official start of the Hurricane Season.

In a Preliminary Impact report from the Ministry of Agriculture, there is a general reduction in cultivation in coastal districts owing mainly to the loss of crops already cultivated. Some farmers have witnessed the death of farm animals as a result of the extremely harsh drought conditions.

Strategic responses:

1. Livestock were provided water and grass transported by the government at zero cost to the farmer.
2. Farmers have been assisted with water tanks and support to enhance on farm irrigation.

There are three matter concerning livestock farmers which we must address

1. Stray dogs are destroying many animals;
2. Many farmers with animals are failing to restrain these animals thus causing destruction to crop farmers; and
3. The Ministry is expecting to begin an animal farm tagging project in three (3) weeks.

3. 6,000 farmers will receive drought recovery support.

Mr. Speaker, I now move to Progress, challenges and prospects in establishing modern medicinal industry and the impact of COVID 19 on the process.

There is a clear policy to diversify the agriculture sector in St. Vincent and the Grenadines. The COVID 19 pandemic has brought into sharper focus the need and demand for plant based medicine.

Increasing production of crops which are currently imported as a part of an import substitution drive and the establishment of extraction systems for a plant base medicinal industry are two means of deepening the diversification process, in addition to expanding the acreages of commodities already forming part of the extremely diverse production platform.

Cabinet has granted approval upon application to 38 traditional cannabis cultivators; 10 groups of traditional cannabis cultivators comprising over 150 persons in the aggregate; 13 farmers who were not traditional cultivators; 5 local investor companies and 17 foreign based companies. Many of the investors have been unable to travel for the past months. This quite naturally will slow down the cannabis industry's development.

The Medicinal Cannabis Authority is currently in the final stages of completing its Lab (95% completed) to be able to do all testing required in country. The focus is on medicinal. This begins and ends with science. Once the standard operating procedures are in place applications will be made for international accreditation. This will certainly improve the marketability of medicinal cannabis produced in St. Vincent and the Grenadines.

For many years, we have heard canvassed information about the medicinal properties of many plants in St. Vincent and the Grenadines. A book was written and published by Jo-Ann Ince Jack. The Ministry of Agriculture has contacted Professor Lennard O'Garro to do a costing on an entire plant based medicinal extract value chain. This is expected to be completed in approximately three months. The plants which will be the main focus, but the list is not exhaustive are: arrowroot, aloe vera, turmeric, moringa, mushroom, ginger, coconut for coconut oil, mauby and nutmeg.

The idea is to establish clear Standards and Compliance Research protocols for entities wishing to explore the extraction of plant based medicine. This Research Only programme will be for twenty four months minimum, after which Professor O'Garro is expected to advise on pathways to develop a full fledged plant based medicinal extraction industry. This will certainly support the first phase of the industry which touches and concerns medicinal cannabis extraction.

We have started meetings with local herbalists; will be meeting our local chemistry and biology experts. This is a part of the next generation of agriculture. We already have the Plant Breeding legislation to protect the rights of plant breeders, this will attract scientists who will be able to improve the genetics of a wide variety of plants for use in the plant based medicine extraction sector.

Mr. Speaker, finally the Canadian Farm Workers and the impact of COVID 19.

In 2019, the Canadian Farm Workers Program had 396 active employee contracts.

In 2020, while it is anticipated that all farms will request the workers who worked in 2019 and more, the COVID 19 pandemic has caused a significant delay in the recruitment process.

The first charter with Vincentian workers left St. Vincent and the Grenadines on May 12th, with 130 contracted workers;

The second charter was on June 4th with 77 contracted workers.

A third Charter is being arranged.

Under new COVID 19 policies established by the Government of Canada, all workers must undergo a 14 day quarantine before commencing works.

- Employers are required to assist workers with arrangements to obtain necessary supplies during the 14 day quarantine period and to provide accommodation.
- Employers have been mandated to pay wages of 30 hours per week, during the 14 day quarantine period
- The Canadian Government has approved a CAN\$1,500.00 grant, per worker for eligible employers, to help them with the costs associated with the mandatory 14 day quarantine period.

- While in Canada, workers are covered by the relevant Provincial Medical Insurance. Further, supplementary insurance has been arranged for workers from the Eastern Caribbean to cover cost which may be incurred from COVID related conditions.

Over the past 8 years, we have trained a cadre of young persons in basic agriculture at all the agriculture stations. This initiative has started and will next week will involve see the stations at Walilabou, Three Rivers, Orange Hill and Perseverance added. Persons will obtain a Certificate of Competence in basic agriculture upon completion of the training.

Employers for the Canadian Farm Workers contract have selected persons on many occasions simply because they have a reference that they were trained already in basic agriculture technology and methods. For this year, part of the project will be done at the station and on farm.

Mr. Speaker, in closing I thank, all food producers and stakeholders. The region and the World is watching and commending. The backbone is agriculture and fisheries and we have to be resolute and resilient, creative and active, stern and forceful.

The Cabinet continues to provide significant support. This is a working government and we will continue to support the vulnerable and all in need; and will support producers and other stakeholders to increase production and productivity. Life and living must continue.

I am obliged Mr. Speaker.