



NEWS RELEASE

CARICOM MINISTER – LET’S FEED OURSELVES

ACM: St Georges, Grenada

October 19, 2010 - Regional ministers of agriculture are to begin a series of important meetings here as part of the 2010 edition of Caribbean Week of Agriculture.

However, even before they sit at the roundtable, they are going to be confronted with a series of recommendations aimed at ensuring the regional trade bloc is in a position to better feed itself.

Several key challenges emerged during first two days of meetings involving officials, farmers, financial agencies, agriculture experts and representatives of youth and women organizations that concluded Tuesday afternoon.

Producing enough to feed the regional population, 20 million tourists a year and retaining surpluses for export were recurring issues during the meetings.

The need to urgently reduce the region’s annual US \$ 4 billion food import bill was illustrated by Honourable Hilson Baptiste, Antigua and Barbuda’s Minister of Agriculture, Lands, Housing and Environment at a press conference Tuesday.

Minister Baptiste expressed serious concern over the quality of food being imported if not dumped into the Caribbean, pointing to physical deformities now evident in young children consuming chicken meat laced with what he described as “unknown” chemicals.

The forum was organized by The Netherlands-based Technical Centre for Agriculture and Rural Development- African, Caribbean and Pacific (CTA), - and chaired by CTA Director, Mr Michael Hailu.

“We are seeing 10-year-old boys with breasts. The same is true with young girls. This is all because we are not producing enough of our own and have to spend so much money importing food that we can grow ourselves,” he said.

He called for revocation of colonial and Atlantic slave era laws banning farmers from putting up permanent structures on land, suggesting instead that such regulations, where they occur in the region, be replaced either with land ownership or 25-year leases for farmers to help them obtain crucial credit to encourage further development of agricultural small and medium businesses.

The Minister pointed out that the Caribbean, with probably the best weather for agriculture in the world, is ironically a net importer of food because it lacks the administrative and institutional capacity, and political will, to address the situation.

He also said regional ministerial committees are working to reduce praedial larceny, now running at 25 percent, to 5 percent.

Ms. Ena Harvey, a Tourism Agro Specialist at the Inter American Institute for Cooperation in Agriculture (IICA) also called on policy makers for greater institutional and political support for the farming sector, pointing to the irony of a region that spends billions importing food “to feed the very tourists who come.”

She stated that the development of an agro-tourism resource centre will give support to industry players pointing to available local food outlets like hotels, villas and cruise ships. “Tourists are an extension of the local population,” she said, noting that many come to sample the regional cuisine.

Just as passionate and vocal as Minister Baptiste was Jethro Greene, the Chief Coordinator of the Caribbean Farmers Network. He said the time has come for the farming community to place itself “at the centre” of the debate about the direction of Caribbean life rather than leave it to politicians “who had put us on the backburner” for decades.

“Why entrust the same people who put us on the backburner before. That is why we are putting ourselves at the centre now,” he said of his organisation representing 500,000 farmers in 13 member states.

Meanwhile, several mostly women farmers who participated in the two-day forum related their difficulty in accessing credit, complaining of being very upset about being deemed “high risk clients.”

They expressed disappointment about the absence of commercial banks and other lending institutions, suggesting that all stakeholders in one place would have been ideal.

Melvin Edwards, of the Caribbean Confederation of Credit Unions, said people still hold commercial banks in high regard despite the recent global banking crisis.

He noted some banks were still reluctant to lend to farmers, leaving this to credit unions and other intermediate institutions which do not demand collateral in the same way banks do.

“We have learnt that bigger is not necessarily better,” he said, as he urged a new thinking relating to credit availability to farmers.



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Meanwhile, the Association of Caribbean MediaWorkers (ACM) is pleased to provide all the CWA-related events on its networks, www.acmediaworkers.com and www.livestream.com/acmediaworkers.

The live video stream is accompanied by live chat and journalists throughout the region are encouraged to participate in the discussion by logging in with your facebook or Twitter credentials. There is also a blog set up at www.acmediaworkers.blogspot.com where regular updates will be posted, and you are also encouraged to comment on the matters being discussed.

The CWA, the CTA and ACM have been conducting an e-discussion forum and journalists are invited to visit <http://groups.google.com/group/cta-workshop> to express their opinions on the topics being debated.

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