



Ministerial Statement
By
The Hon. Walter Roban, JP, MP
Minister of Home Affairs
Friday, 8th March, 2024

Progress update on the Integrated Agriculture Strategy

Mr. Speaker, I rise today to update this Honourable House on the Ministry of Home Affairs' Integrated Agriculture strategy which I introduced this time last year, and which is aimed at supporting and enhancing the island's local food production.

Mr. Speaker,

Bermuda's Agricultural industry is at a pivotal moment in our history and as we all know is under pressures not seen before. Land for in-ground farming is in decline. Labour and costs of doing business have escalated higher than ever before. Climate change is expected to bring stronger and more frequent hurricanes, extended periods of rainfall or drought – all factors beyond the control of the traditional in-ground farmer. As the

existing farmers continue to battle against these obstacles, the Government is actively working to support local farmers in their steadfast efforts to provide fresh, healthy products for our local market.

Mr. Speaker,

In May 2023, the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) secured the services of a consultant agronomist who is tasked with reviewing the existing industry and identifying opportunities for efficiencies and growth. This service is a result of a long standing request of farmers I endeavored to fulfill.

To date the consultant has undertaken a number of key initiatives related to weed management, soil health and nutrient analysis, the results of which have been communicated to the farmers. He has connected local farmers with overseas resources to provide information on improved crop seed varieties, agriculture management and technological innovations. He has provided a training opportunity for the farmers in safe pesticide application to a standard equivalent to the University of Florida's pesticide license certification level.

With the assistance of a specialist, the agronomist is currently undertaking a plant nematode study looking to identify the types of parasitic and beneficial nematodes in the island fields, banana patches and golf courses. These microscopic worms can have a significant impact on crop yields and are considered one of the premier agriculture pests. It has been over

fifty (50) years since the last time one of these studies was conducted. The study will provide recommendations on how to reduce pest pressure and crop damage in the long term.

Mr. Speaker,

The consultant agronomist's work will continue for two more years. Over this period, he will focus on crop innovation and diversification, development of grading standards for local produce and identification of post-harvest handling efficiencies and added value opportunities. During this time, he will be "shadowed" by a full-time trainee Agronomist filled by a Bermudian. This will ensure good knowledge transfer and retention. We are currently concluding the process of filling this post, which I expect to be completed in the next several weeks.

Mr. Speaker,

In support of the economic embargo that entitles local farmers to restrict the importation of fresh produce when sufficient yields have been produced locally, the Department of Environment and Natural Resources has implemented a review of all shipment invoices for imported commercial produce to ensure that infractions against the economic embargo are not taking place, thus best positioning farmers to be able to sell their produce locally when crop yields are plentiful and their product is at its best.

Invoices for each shipment of produce are also reviewed for compliance with established quarantine embargoes to ensure the exclusion of serious pests and disease from Bermuda which could negatively impact the agricultural industry and the wider environment. Policy amendments will be implemented, where needed, to further support the embargo system and to improve the uptake of local produce.

Mr. Speaker,

The GIS based Arable Audit will be completed in the next two months. This audit is capturing up-to-date information on field size, use, lease/ownership, access issues with the intention of identifying opportunities for new fields of production and effective use of the land resources available for in-ground farming. This study will look to identify opportunities such as new water connections from underground lines and threats to our farm fields such as saltwater inundation from future climate change and coastal erosion in low lying areas.

Mr. Speaker,

Farmers are still reporting that theft continues to be an impediment to successful crop production. As part of a pilot programme, with the aim of reducing this loss, cameras have been provided to farmers for problem fields to record 'night farming.' The effectiveness of this method is being evaluated and, where possible, persons involved will be prosecuted. Members of the public are urged to report any suspicious behavior to the

Bermuda Police Service at two one one (211) or the Department of Environment and Natural Resources at two, three, six, four, two, zero, one (236-4201) or email at environment@gov.bm.

Mr. Speaker,

We are pleased to report that local farmers have also successfully secured and imported clean shipments of strawberry plants and seed potatoes for propagation in 2023. Additionally, the agricultural consultant is researching potential sources of suitable clean germplasm as part of a fruit augmentation and diversification project available to farmers. We expect that successful uptake will have positive outcomes for both farmers and small local cottage industries in the form of jams, jellies, chutneys, preserves and the like, which can be promoted on the local market and to the tourist industry.

Mr. Speaker,

As I stated in my recent Budget Brief, I am pleased to announce that five hundred thousand dollars (\$500,000) has been allocated to begin work on a replacement Agriculture Services Centre. Cold storage is critical for keeping certain crops fresh, such as carrots and potatoes. Unfortunately, the existing centre in Prospect is well past its “sell-by-date.” This facility is essential for our local farming industry and our farmers have voiced their concerns, which this Government has heard.

I can advise that at this time the replacement building has been designed and received both full planning permission and building approval. Every effort has been made to incorporate energy efficiency, renewable energy, and new water storage facilities, amongst many other elements.

This funding will allow for the completion of the project's contract and preparation of the new site adjacent to the current facility.

Mr. Speaker,

Globally, countries recognize both the necessity of pesticide use in agriculture and the negative effects some pesticide have on the environment. In 2020, the European Union developed strategies and initiatives, as part of their *Farm to Fork* program, to reduce by fifty percent (50%) the overall use of chemical pesticides by 2030. Following in these footsteps, this Government, recognizing Bermuda's sensitive ecological systems and delicate balance, will strive to reduce impediments to crop yields in a more sustainable way by researching suitable biological control agents for pest and disease management and encouraging the use of effective environmentally friendly pesticide products suitable for commercial agricultural systems. In the next year, the DENR will undertake an insect crop pest survey to identify opportunities for biological control as a method to re-balance pest populations. Staff will work with overseas experts to identify pests and research the specific biocontrol agent to reduce pest pressure. This Government also

recognizes that science and technology are continuously making improvements in the efficacy and accessibility of more environmentally sustainable bio-pesticides and, as such, we will encourage and promote the inclusion of more environmentally sustainable pest control products in the commercial farming industry by ensuring that the Agricultural Service Centre stocks less toxic and non-toxic pest and disease control products available to the farmers for purchase. This will offer the opportunity to reduce negative impacts to the environment. Increased use of these products and agents is expected to lead to less pest and disease pressure, reduced synthetic pesticide application, and, therefore, an overall reduction in environmental pollution, healthier plants and a more balanced ecosystem.

Mr. Speaker,

It is imperative for government to not only implement strategies that support the current industry but also to look to the future and create policies that allow for the sustainability of the entire agricultural industry. Strategies that provide realistic support must be formed in consultation with the industry stakeholders to identify clear objectives that enable the industry to flourish, grow and remain economically viable, relevant and attractive to new partners, whilst protecting the environment and local resources for future generations. As such, the DENR has already actively engaged with the Board of Agriculture and key stakeholders in the agricultural industry, in a larger conversation to hear concerns, identify

obstacles to growth and record recommendations on directions for progression and development of the industry. The priorities identified will be discussed with the to the Board of Agriculture, looking for the opportunities for implementation.

Mr. Speaker,

It is globally acknowledged that technology and artificial intelligence will play an increasing role in most large scale farming systems and in Bermuda, this government is also looking to technology and scientific advances that can be embraced by the smaller scale farming systems in Bermuda to provide realistic efficiencies, cost savings and input reductions such as requiring less fertilizer or targeted precision irrigation. As we all recognize, technology and innovation has notably been embraced by the younger generation and we can learn from their willingness and flexibility in transitioning to new or different systems. Agriculture is no different and we are pleased to see a few farmers, some new to the industry, some more well-established, experimenting with innovative processes and new methods of crop production. This Ministry is committed to advocating for policies that support both traditional in-ground farming and innovative new systems that will contribute to food security for the island in this generation and for generations to come.

Mr. Speaker,

We have all been touched by health concerns, either ourselves or those we care about, and we are acutely aware of how our diet plays a key role in our own health. In an age of easily accessible, processed, convenience food, this Government is encouraging all of our people to draw closer to nature and to increase our intake of natural, fresh produce, such as that grown locally. As such, and as these updates have shown, this Ministry is committed to collaborating with industry stakeholders to continue to identify realistic and relevant initiatives that will support existing farming systems and foster new growth in this industry, whilst ensuring that the environment is protected, resources are managed for future generations, and our local economy is prosperous.

In closing, I would like to take this opportunity to encourage the public to buy local, support our farmers and fishermen, so that they can continue to provide for us.

Thank you, **Mr. Speaker.**