



MINISTRY OF INDUSTRY, COMMERCE, AGRICULTURE & FISHERIES

Media Briefing (Virtual) Via Zoom

MICAF's Response to the Covid-19 Pandemic

HON. J.C. HUTCHINSON, MINISTER WITHOUT PORTFOLIO

Tuesday, March 31, 2020

10:00 a.m. - 11:00 a.m.

Ladies and gentlemen, good morning.

Let me pick up right where Minister Green ended. We are all in this together. We have to be act in solidarity and we have to be solution oriented.

And, I will therefore take this opportunity this morning to outline the actions we have been taking as a Ministry to ensure that there are adequate supplies of food both now and for the foreseeable future.

Be assured that our farmers are on the job. They have not stopped working and there are plentiful supplies of local produce and fresh food.

On the other hand, we are also aware that some farmers who would normally supply the hotel and hospitality sector have had excess supplies of fruits and vegetables available for redistribution to local consumers, given the fall-off of demand from the hotel and hospitality sector.

Let me assure the nation that as a Ministry, we moved as quickly as possible to assist with the redistribution process and in so doing, we have:

- Provided and are intensifying assistance to those farmers to get their supplies to the main markets;
- Asked farmers with produce for sale to contact their RADA parish offices and the parish marketing officers, whose contacts have been circulated and we will continue to circulate. Farmers can also contact the Agri-Linkages Exchange at 876-970-0838;
- Met with and received commitments from major supermarkets to purchase additional volumes of produce. MICAF and RADA marketing officers have been working with purchasing managers to identify sources of produce and to create and support the links between the farmers and these buyers.

- Met with agro-processors who, where possible, have increased their intake of items like pepper and scallion to be processed into mash. Juice makers have also committed to, where possible, utilize more local products in their juices, as well as to process for storage.

The Ministry, through RADA is putting systems in place to support the movement of produce to the factories and maintain throughput.

- Identified several buyers and distributors with access to cold storage facilities who have indicated their willingness to continue purchase of agricultural produce from farmers as well as assisting the process of purchasing produce at the farm level and distribution to final markets.
- **As an immediate injection, \$240 million will be made available to purchase excess produce from farmers beginning with immediate effect. Working with RADA, farmers with excess produce have been identified. Purveyors would utilize the existing collection, storage and distribution mechanisms to purchase produce from farmers and move into the marketplace including large purchasers and communities and workplaces.**

- Identified several buyers and distributors with access to cold storage facilities who have indicated their willingness to continue the purchase of agricultural produce from farmers as well as assisting to purchase produce at the farm level and distribution to final markets.

Initial discussions have been held with purveyors such as Glastonbury Purveyors, MarketFresh Ltd., and Ansel Golaub and Sons, who have indicated their willingness to utilize their systems in a public private partnership agreement to assist the agricultural sector.

I strongly feel that this is an opportune time to put a structure in place for the agricultural sector and I am proposing the establishment of food marts in every district.

- This is part of an immediate short-term response to bring fresh produce to market, minimising the threat of waste due to the downturn in the tourism sector.

Supplies of milk, eggs, poultry, pork and fish

Egg production is running at approximately 22% over last year. We are averaging approximately 15 million eggs per month, which is adequate to supply normal demand.

This level of production is expected to be maintained through to the end of May. As the trade releases more layer placement data, projections beyond this point will be made.

Consultations with the Pig/Pork Industry indicate that there are adequate supplies of pork in the marketplace and sufficient animals in the system for slaughter for the next few months. This will be adequate to meet normal demand for this product.

Chicken meat represents approximately 80% of our meat protein supply. Chicken meat production will average approximately 2.7 million kgs per week for the next nine weeks, up to early May, 2020. At this time, the industry is not seeing any immediate factors that will cause any significant disruption in its capacity to continue production beyond this point, or to prevent the conversion of the chickens now in the field and being hatched in the next three weeks from being processed.

So, there is adequate food in the country.

We may encounter issues of bottlenecks and disruption in distribution so these will have to be identified, if and when they arise, to ensure that this food reaches to the end users efficiently and when needed. We are working with the private sector to rationalize and manage excess production of meats and eggs to ensure continued support to

our local Industries and to increase demand and movement of these products.

We are working with the private sector to rationalize and manage excess production of meats and eggs, to ensure continued support to our local Industries and to increase demand and movement of these products.

Now, more than ever, consumers are being encouraged to utilize those local produce and products that are available and may end up being in excess supply. These include vegetables, our local roots and tubers, including sweet and Irish potatoes, chicken, eggs, and pork. MICAF is working with the various value chains to ensure that food supplies are maintained and inventories are being monitored.

The National Fisheries Authority has met with the commercial fisheries sector to discuss, among other things, the fallout in the sector as a result of COVID-19 especially as it relates to a downturn in export market for lobster. The Fisheries Officers have also been ensuring that the Ministry of Health guidelines and information are passed on to our artisanal fishers. It is estimated that the sector will have an immediate fallout of approximately \$2.1B from losses of local and international sales. Additional meetings will be convened with the stakeholders to craft a detailed response to the crisis.

DONATIONS

As it regards excess supplies, we can also report that farmers have donated 30,000 kgs of produce valued at \$7.5 million to the Ministry of Labour and Social Security for distribution as part of their COVID-19 assistance programme.

RADA has also assisted farmers to market approximately \$15 million worth of produce.

RADA

RADA has conducted an assessment of the country's supply of selected critical agricultural produce and is reporting that, by all indications, vegetable, condiment, fruits, roots and tubers will be in normal supply for this time of the year.

Vegetable production remains in good supply with the exception of the exotics (broccoli, cauliflower) and coloured bell peppers. Vegetables will remain in good supply for the period March to May.

Fruits available are cantaloupe, melon, papaya, pineapple, banana, plantain, Otaheiti apple, star apple and mango. Fruits will be in their usual abundance for the reporting period of March to May.

RADA is also encouraging the public to consume these produce to boost the immune system against the COVID-19 virus and to reduce food loss and waste at this time when essential vitamins and nutrients are needed to guard against COVID-19.

MEDIUM TERM STRATEGY

As a medium-term strategy, the Ministry is also collaborating with the relevant agencies and farmer organisations to not just continue cultivation as usual, but to ramp up production through our Production and Productivity Programme and, in that regard, to target short-term cash crops such as pumpkins, vegetables and fruits that are also of great nutritional value as we seek to boost our immune systems and combat not just coronavirus but other diseases.

DROUGHT ADAPTATION /MITIGATION PROGRAMME 2020/2021

A number of parishes have already reported drought conditions. This less than average rainfall is expected to continue until the end of May 2020.

The Ministry, through its Drought Adaptation Programme, at a cost of \$400M is aiming to increase agricultural production by at least 5% over a 12-month period for vegetables, fruits, condiments, roots and tubers and small ruminants.

The programme will be implemented in the parishes of St. Elizabeth, Manchester, Trelawny, Clarendon, St. Catherine, St. Ann and St. Mary targeting in excess of 13,000 farmers.

The seed of opportunity in this crisis is our long recognised goal to grow what we eat and eat what we grow and to re-energise our individual efforts at backyard gardening.

RADA will implement the **Backyard Garden Kit** programme to encourage the growing of vegetable crops at home to provide additional dietary and budgetary support to urban and peri-urban populations. We are targeting at least 5,000 backyard gardening kits to be available to beneficiaries later this year.

Extension Services

RADA will ensure continuous delivery of extension services during this challenging period and beyond. Our Agricultural Extension Officers are available and can be contacted via telephone or email. Public advisories are in place providing contact details for Parish Offices and Marketing Extension Officers.

FOOD IMPORTS

As it relates to the importation of plant and plant products, effective Wednesday, March 18, 2020, both the Plant Produce Inspection Branch and the Veterinary Services Division have implemented paperless processing of Permits and Phytosanitary Certificates in light of the COVID-19 pandemic situation.

- **All Import Permits must be applied for online by logging on to the www.moatrade.gov.jm website, to submit an application.**
 - Import Permits that are approved and paid for will be automatically transferred to Jamaica Customs Agency ASYCUDA as a part of our new paperless system.

Jamaica is a major importer of seafood, especially from within the region (Guyana and Suriname). On average, nearly two million kg of seafood is imported monthly. If there is any disruption in trade, this food segment will be affected negatively. The trade, however, has assured that significant quantities are in stock to ensure supply over the next few weeks, and no major disruption in trade is foreseen in the immediate future.

Having said that, the Government is also mindful that a significant proportion of raw material for animal feed, input material such as fertilisers and pesticides necessary for agricultural production are imported into the island.

Our input suppliers have assured us that they have at least three months of supplies available and firm commitments for replenishment.

Ladies and gentlemen, in closing, let me encourage all of us not to waste the opportunity of this COVID-19 crisis to implement what we know and have long held to be important and true: we have to grow what we eat; eat what we can and can what we can't.