**The Hon. Jomo C. Campbell**

**Member of Parliament For Centreville**

**Minister Of Agriculture and Marine Resources**

**Contribution to the 2024-2025 Budget Debate**

**“Changing the Status Quo, Changing Lives”**

**June 2024**

**CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY**

Thank you Madam Speaker

Madam Speaker

I am grateful to the Almighty God who has afforded each of us another day in the land of the living in the beautiful islands of The Bahamas.

I rise once again on behalf of the wonderful residents of the Centreville constituency. I would like to express my gratitude to the citizens of Centreville for the opportunity to represent them in this place and for their ongoing support. I want to assure them that I am doing my best to make them proud and to assist them in any way that I can to make their lives better and to make the communities within the constituency better places to live and work.

Madam Speaker,

The half way point in my first term as the Member of Parliament for Centreville has come and gone. In the time since my election, I have endeavored to have a constant presence in my constituency. I have also ensured that every time I stand in this place to contribute to debate that I detail what my team and I have accomplished for and with the people of Centreville.

In the last two and half years, I have shared many special holidays and occasions with residents. Unfortunately, we have also shared sad times when loved ones have passed on. We have supported the various schools in Centreville with school and sporting supplies, served meals and provided funding for special initiatives. We have also sponsored community programs geared toward edifying residents, especially young people.

Currently, my team and I are working on our upcoming festivities to commemorate Father's Day.

Madam Speaker,

Construction of the Centreville Community Centre on Gibbs Corner continues with the latest milestone being the pouring of the swimming pool that will be a part of the activities available for residents to enjoy on the property. This is the largest project that I have taken on in my constituency and I am excited for the day when I can invite all of you to the official opening of the building. This community center is a place that I hope will become a hub of positive activity and learning in Centreville for years and decades to come.

Madam Speaker

As a firm believer in democracy and democratic processes, I extend congratulations to the newly re-elected Leader of the Free National Movement (FNM), the Member for Marco City. While Marco City and his FNM colleagues will undoubtedly now try their best to become the next government, we on this side will do our best to keep the FNM right where they started and currently reside...in opposition.

Madam Speaker

I also extend congratulations to the Most Hon. Member for Killarney for the time that he has dedicated to public service in this place, as a Cabinet Minister and as the nation's Prime Minister for just over four years.

I'm sure that many of us have learned much from Killarney while he served as Leader of the Opposition and Prime Minister of this country. If nothing else, we have all learned lessons in resolve and resilience from our colleague from Killarney two skills that we all need.

Madam Speaker

I thank the Hon. Prime Minister, Minister of Finance and Member of Cat Island, Rum Cay and San Salvador for this year's budget communication themed 'Changing The Status Quo, Changing Lives'. It was an eloquent synopsis of what this administration has done and intends to do to continue our efforts to better the lives of the Bahamian people.

I must also mention the Minister of Economic Affairs, Sen. Hon. Michael Halkitis, Financial Secretary, Simon Wilson and the public servants at the various ministries and agencies that work daily to ensure that our country fiscal state remains stable.

Madam Speaker

Contrary to what some would have the Bahamian people believe our economy is strong and receiving good reviews from international ratings agencies such as Moody's. This did not materialize out of thin air. It is because of the work that is being done by this administration in partnership with the hardworking people in the public service. Moody's Investor Services recently reported that the Bahamian economy grew by 2.6% in 2023. The report was also favourable of the government's fiscal policies and our efforts to ensure transparency and accountability with the publishing of various reports.

Madam Speaker

Under the leadership of the Member for Cat Island, Rum Cay and San Salvador the debt to gross domestic product (GDP) ratio has been reduced from 100.4% in June 2021 to 79.9% at latest recording. The unemployment rate is the lowest it has been since 2008 at 8.8%, this means that more people are gainfully employed now than before Hurricane Dorian and the COVID-19 pandemic.

Madam Speaker

This administration is building hospitals on New Providence and Grand Bahama for the first time in decades. This administration is providing affordable housing options for Bahamians. This administration is ensuring that entrepreneurs, including women and young people, have an opportunity to win government contracts. This administration is building and repairing roads and airports in the Family Islands. This administration has given Bahamians the choice between jury and bench trials. This administration has worked to ensure our country was removed from blacklists. This administration has attracted foreign direct investors to develop projects on many of the major islands in the archipelago. This administration is ensuring that this country has a concrete disaster plan. This administration is providing a hot meals to students and ensuring that they attend school and are engaged. This administration has provided funding and resources to farmers and agriculture entrepreneurs. This administration is ensuring that public servants receive well deserved promotions and that union agreements are up to date. This administration is increasing the deployment of renewable energy sources. This administration is providing the uniformed branches with the tools and technology necessary to fight crime and protect our borders.

Madam Speaker

If I go further with the accomplishments of this administration I may not finish in my allotted time. So I now turn to my ministry.

Madame Speaker,

The Ministry of Agriculture and Marine Resources is an important and vast ministry. It is charged with the sustenance of our people, the protection of our marine resources and the health and safety of the food we consume. All of these responsibilities come under the ministry with its administrative duties, the Department of Agriculture, the Department of Marine Resources, the Department of Cooperatives, the Bahamas Agricultural and Industrial Corporation (BAIC), the Bahamas Agriculture and Marine Science Institute (BAMSI), the Bahamas Agriculture Health and Food Safety Authority (BAHFSA) and Public Markets.

With all of the responsibilities vested in my ministry, our most important task is ensuring the forward movement in our national goal of obtaining food security for the Bahamian people. We remain resolute to this goal and have been doing our part towards its achievement.

**DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE**

Madame Speaker

The Department of Agriculture (DOA) continues to regulate all agricultural services and products in The Commonwealth of The Bahamas and is actively working towards fulfilling the Government’s mandate toward strengthen the agricultural and fisheries industries.

Madame Speaker

In furtherance of our commitment to fostering the development of future farmers and agriculturists, the Department of Agriculture has launched the Agriculture School Support Program. Public schools across the country were contacted to determine what supplies were needed for their Agricultural Programs. To date, eleven (11) Schools have benefited from the program, five (5) in New Providence and the remaining on Exuma, Grand Bahama, Eleuthera, Cat Island and Andros. The schools received water pumps, irrigation supplies, and seed starting material, shade cloths, shovels, fertilizers and wheel barrows among other items.

Staff of the Department of Agriculture across the country especially on the islands of New Providence, Exuma, Eleuthera and Grand Bahama continue to provide technical support to school agriculture science programs.

Madam Speaker

The Department has distributed tractors to Cat Island, Grand Bahama, Eleuthera, Abaco and Exuma to aid with land preparation for Farmers on the respective islands. The tractors include attachments such Rome Discs for ploughing and tilling, Augers for post hole digging and tree planting, bush hog mower for clearing, heavy bushes and over grown fields.

Madame Speaker

At the Gladstone Road Agricultural Centre (GRAC) Plant Propagation Unit, we are well on our way to revitalizing our seedling production which will soon enable us to be able to provide Bahamian Farmers with high quality seedlings at subsidized prices.

Madam Speaker

The **Abattoir** received One (1) vehicle, Two (2) printers, One (1) Electric Hand Held Saw, One (1) Washer and One (1) Dryer. Two (2) saws in the Butcher Room were also serviced and parts replaced. These additions allow for staff to continue to carry out their duties as best as possible. Madam Speaker, at this time, preparations are still being made to facilitate other upgrades to the Abattoir as the current building is still in need of repairs and painting and the property is in need of fencing.

Madam Speaker,

To aid in boosting employee morale, an Employee Conclave was hosted in May 2024 in **Grand Bahama** allowing for face-to-face dialogue with respective heads of the Ministry and Departments, and staff were presented with tokens of appreciation for their dedicated service and hard work.. Madam Speaker, a Farmers Meeting was also hosted in Grand Bahama in May 2024 allowing Farmers to meet with the Minister, Permanent Secretary, Under Secretary, Deputy Permanent Secretary, Director of Agriculture and the Director of Marine Resources and Chairman of BAIC. Farmers were able to express the challenges faced and concerns for the Agricultural Sector.

Madam Speaker,

The DOA donated Ten (10) Sheep to the Annual **Long Island** Mutton Festival which will bring genetic diversity to that island’s sheep population.

Madam Speaker,

In April 2024, the Permanent Secretary, Director of Agriculture and Director of Marine Resources traveled to **Exuma** to participate in a staff meeting with Department and BAIC staff presenting them with tokens of appreciation for their dedicated service and hard work. During this meeting, a building was identified to house the DOA and DMR staff along with tractors, implements and marine vessels, which have been allocated to service that island.

Madam Speaker

A Farmers Meeting was also held in Exuma led by the Director of Agriculture and the Director Marine Resources and their team; hearing the concerns and providing solutions to all present.

The most recent Farmers Meeting was held in Cat Island, where a new John Deere Tractor with attachments was presented.

More farmers meetings are scheduled for New Providence and all other islands where the Department of Agriculture has a presence.

**The Bahamas PUAS Drone Geospatial Training Program**

Madam Speaker

In The Bahamas, subsistence to semi commercial farming operations is more commonly practiced. Farmers are often unable to increase scalability of their operations due to constraints to maintaining quality, quantities and a marginal cost of production. Drone technology can be used as aa digital agriculture system which collects data, analyzes the effects of climate change on production and processing, and has the best potential to enable Bahamian farmers and fishermen to overcome these constraints. It is for these reasons that the Ministry of Agriculture and Marine Resources has collaborated with the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) to train eighteen (18) participants , 8 UAS pilots and 10 geospatial analysts, in a Participatory Drone Mapping and Geospatial Analysis’ training.

This three-month programme is designed to support agricultural, coastal, marine and disaster risk management applications in the Caribbean. It will do this by supporting Agriculture, Coastal and Marine Applications, utilizing an online learning management system, and Training, and to provide technical support to ensure flexibility and adaptability to national conditions.

Madam Speaker

The drone technology will support the following:

1. Crop Planning and Forecasting
2. Real time field and ocean monitoring
3. Coastal Management
4. Agribusiness Planning and Strategizing: Farm Profitability
5. Disaster Risk Management
6. Surveillance and Monitoring of the Marine cost for Purposes of Prosecution

**Replenishing Sheep Stock**

Madam Speaker

The important farm work at the Gladstone Road Agricultural Centre continues, where preferred livestock are reared to bolster the health of the national stock. The DOA currently has 100 sheep to be given to farmers to counteract inbreeding and promote disease resistant offspring.

**Chinese donation**

Madam Speaker

In April of this year, on the occasion of the official visit of His Excellency Mao Weiming Governor of Hunan Province of China to The Bahamas, the People’s Republic of China and equipment manufacturer Zoomlion donated agricultural machinery to Government of The Bahamas in the form of 2 tractors and 2 rotary tillers. One tractor is for New Providence and one for Grand Bahama. We remain grateful.

**Chinese Agricultural Programme**

Madam Speaker

The Chinese Government maintains a flourishing agricultural assistance programme where various fruits and vegetables are grown in shade houses by different methods aimed at teaching and informing local farmers on best practices and revealing what is possible in our soil and under our sun. I wish to express thanks to the Government of China for their continued assistance.

**CARDI**

Madam Speaker

The Caribbean Agricultural Research and Development Institute has been steadfast in providing sterling contributions to the growth and development of our agricultural sector. CARDI, through national consultations is impacting on the regional food basket through commodity programmes – small ruminants, sweet potato, and other root crops, cereals and grain legumes, hot peppers and fruits and vegetables. I also wish to express thanks to CARDI for their continued assistance.

**Animal Protection and Control**

Madam Speaker

Issues related to animal control and protection remain serious and vexing. We are very concerned of the recent uptick in dog attacks on people in our country, and again encourage owners to ensure that their dogs are properly contained. We must do our part to ensure that our stray dog population is managed.

We are very concerned by the reported cases of animal abuse and again ask Bahamians to shift the thinking, and change the reality. Let us all take great care of all animals. If you unfortunately find yourself in a situation where you cannot provide proper care, please do the right thing and surrender the animal to those who can, like our great partners, The Bahamas Humane Society.

We have concluded that more must be done to enforce the laws related to matters of animal protection. So this ministry is suggesting amendments whereby Citations can be issued by Wardens. At the moment only the police can do so.

For the first time in decades, Animal Protection Centres in New Providence and Grand Bahama will undergo major transformation. The planned changes will allow for a more efficient and effective operation and the ability to provide improved services.

Madam Speaker,

We will seek to progress the work of the Animal Protection and Control Board, whose members have determined to join hands with the ministry to make meaningful change. One major task to be undertaken is the amendment to the Act to ensure that the law covers all areas of The Bahamas.

**DEPARTMENT OF MARINE RESOURCES**

Madam Speaker,

The commercial fishing sector in The Bahamas is one that has tremendous potential for further growth and development. This potential is far greater in the Family Islands, particularly in the south-eastern islands.

A report commissioned by The Nature Conservancy and completed in 2023 on the economic impact of the fisheries sector on the economy of The Bahamas indicated that the entire fisheries value chain contribution to the GDP of The Bahamas is much higher than previous estimates of around 1.5%. It noted that the total commercial fisheries contribution to the GDP is actually 5.1%; the recreational fishing contributes 14.9%; and the entire fisheries value chain across both sectors contribute some 20% to the Bahamian GDP.

Madam Speaker,

It was estimated that the Commercial Fisheries Value Chain alone provides for some 6,001 jobs; some $208.6 million in income; some $265.0 million in value added (contribution to GDP); and some $575.5 million in total sales. The Recreational Fisheries Value Chain provides for some 20,916 jobs; $335.6 million in value added (contribution to GDP); and $1.7 billion in total sales. The Entire Fisheries Value Chain provides some 26,917 jobs; $544.2 million in income; some $1.2 billion in value added (contribution to GDP); and some $2.2 billion in total sales.

Madam Speaker

I believe that we are sitting on a gold mine when it comes to our fisheries and marine resources in the country. We must continue to encourage young Bahamians to enter this industry and to assist them in any way possible to sustain their businesses.

Madam Speaker

In CY2023 fishery products and resources landings decreased by 0.5% by weight and a 12.5% decrease in the value of the products and resources landed in comparison to CY2022. The decrease was due largely because of the decrease in crawfish/lobster landings and price per pound. Crawfish/Lobster landings saw a decrease of some 4% in total landings in comparison to CY2022 and a 14.4% decrease in the total value of crawfish/lobster landings compared to CY2022.

Further, as you may be aware, the crawfish/lobster fishery is the single largest fishery in The Bahamas. This fishery accounted for 80.7% of the total landings in CY2023 by weight and 89.9% of the total value of all fishery products landed.

The export value of fishery products and resources exported from The Bahamas during CY2023 was $96.8 million dollars. The figure represents a 0.4% increase over CY2022.

The value of crawfish/lobster exports from The Bahamas in CY2023 was $ 93.6 million dollars accounting for some 96.7% of the total value of all fishery products and resources exports from The Bahamas in CY2023. The export of frozen lobster tails continues to be The Bahamas’ number one edible commodity of export and remains a leader in the Caribbean.

**MARINE STEWARDSHIP COUNCIL (MSC)**

Madam Speaker

The spiny lobster/crawfish fishery became Marine Stewardship Council (MSC) certified during 2018, after a nearly decade long fishery improvement project that involved a partnership between the government, the NGO community, the private sector through the Bahamas Marine Exporters Association and other stakeholders in the fishing industry.

Since becoming certified, the fishery has passed all annual audits, and more recently, the fishery is set to become re-certified through 2028 based on the near final results of a 5-year mark thorough reassessment undertaken in 2023. MSC assessments involve expert reviews of three critical components of fisheries sustainability including the status of the target species in terms of overfishing, impacts of the fishery on the environment and the effectiveness of the governance mechanism in place.

MSC certification signifies to consumers and large businesses on the global scale that a fishery is sustainable based on independent third party reviews. The Bahamas could have all the lobster in the world, but the export oriented highly valuable crawfish/ spiny lobster fishery depends on access to foreign markets to be successful and foreign markets increasingly insist on sustainability. Again, The Bahamas received a very good review during our assessment in July 2023. We expect to receive the final results this month.

Madam Speaker

In addition to the aforementioned, please note during this current fiscal budget (2023/2024) the following permits were issued:

* 457 Commercial Fishing Permits;
* 1,659 Compressor Permits (for the 2023/2024 crawfish season)
* 36 Crawfish Trapping Permit representing some 45,450 crawfish traps;
* 39 Stone Crab Trapping Permits representing some 67,852 stone crab traps; and
* 24 Sportfishing Tournament Permits

**WORK ON NEW SUBSIDIARY LEGISLATION – FISHERIES REGULATIONS**

Madam Speaker,

During my mid-year 2023/2024 budget presentation in February, I noted that since the passage of the new Fisheries Act in December 2020, work began in earnest with stakeholder groups from across the fishing industry of The Bahamas, as well as, the sportfishing sector, other governmental agencies, and NGOs in reviewing the ***Fisheries Resources (Jurisdiction and Conservation) Regulations 1986***, and the many amendments made thereto over the years.

I am happy to report the final new draft legislation is now back with the Office of Legal Affairs in the Attorney General’s Office after completion of the final editing by the Department of Marine Resources with a view of enacting around the third quarter of the year (CY2024).

**FISHERIES ENFORCEMENT – ON THE WATER**

Madam Speaker

We have acquired additional patrol crafts to assist in the ongoing capacity building in the DMR, to ensure we manage our marine resources in a sustainable manner and deter illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing. On May 30, 2024, the Hon. Prime Minister and Member for Cat Island, Rum Cay and San Salvador commissioned a new marine patrol craft in Cat Island. In July, it is expected that another marine patrol craft will be commissioned.

Madam Speaker,

In my mid-year budget presentation I indicated the expected delivery of two new marine patrol for the DMR to assist them in their work. These vessels have been delivered and have been put to work. Another marine patrol craft is presently on order and is expected to be delivered by November this year (2024), and in the new 2024/2025 Budget we intend to order yet another marine patrol craft.

Madam Speaker

All of the aforementioned is in keeping in-line with our commitment to the Bahamian people pronounced in our “Blue Print for Change” document as it relates to commercial fishing and its management.

**MARINE ACTION PARTNERSHIP (MAP)**

Madam Speaker

To ensure sustainable growth in the fishing industry, the Department of Marine Resources along with other enforcement agencies like the Ministry of National Security, the Royal Bahamas Defence Force, the Royal Bahamas Police Force, Bahamas Wildlife Enforcement Network (BaHWEN); Bahamas Customs Department; and the Bahamas National Trust, are engaged in a Marine Action Partnership Project (MAP). The main purpose of the MAP is to establish a Road Map and Strategy on how matters related to the enforcement of fisheries laws by each enforcement agency are addressed. By working together in joint programs and initiatives, more effective prevention of poaching would be realized.

**DEVELOPMENT OF THE BLUE ECONOMY**

Madam Speaker

In our *“Blueprint for Change”*, the development of the *“Blue Economy”* is emphasized highlighting the safe and sustainably development of industries around aquaculture, marine biotechnology, and deep-sea exploration in addition to new fisheries. One of the new potential fisheries is the Sea Cucumber Fishery. I am happy to report that a feasibility study has commenced. The study will ascertain abundance, size distribution and spatial distribution of several Sea Cucumber species, and other notable species encountered; assess the nutritional makeup of sea cucumbers; and estimate ideal harvest levels for each specie because of a growing demand not just locally but also internationally. Results of the study will be provided at its completion.

Madam Speaker

In addition to the sea cucumber feasibility study, the Department of Marine Resources will also initiate a marine turtle ecotourism study as a means of developing an alternative livelihood and entrepreneurship for interested Bahamians. A feasibility study will exam the prospects of developing a turtle ecotourism industry geared towards the viewing of turtles in the wild. Vetting of the draft contract for the study has been completed by the Office of the Attorney General with a view of the study commencing in July (2024).

**MYGATEWAY SERVICES**

Madam Speaker

In line with this administration's pledge *to* “modernize the permit application to ensure a quick, seamless process for applying for all permits needed for commercial and recreational fishing” under the sub-heading Commercial Fishing in Our Blue Print for Change Document, I am happy to report that in two and a half years the Department of Marine Resources has placed nineteen services on the Government’s MyGateway Platform to assist fishers and others in the ease of doing business related to applying for and the renewal of permits/licenses.

In addition to the services, the Department of Marine Resources (DMR) in conjunction with the MyGateway Team coordinated a training workshop for fishers and the public in Spanish Wells during the week of the 17 – 21 April, where fishers were taught how to utilize the online system to use the services provided by the DMR. Members of the public were shown how to sign onto the MyGateway platform and utilize the various government online services. Some of the services include but are not limited to applications for and renewal of commercial fishing permits, applications for and renewal of compressor permits, crawfish and stone crab trapping permits, etc.

**FISHERIES SECTOR TRAINING**

**Madame Speaker,**

In keeping with our commitments outlined in the “Blueprint for Change” to “create job training initiatives for young entrepreneurial fishermen”, my ministry through the Department of Marine Resources (DMR) will embarked on a series of fisheries training programmes designed to teach fishers in the Family Islands how to construct fish pots. The main objectives of the fish pot training programme will be:

* Train fishers in the art and techniques of fish pot construction; and
* Create an opportunity for an alternative livelihood for some fishers to commence small start-up businesses in fish pot and land crab pot construction.

The first of these training sessions commenced in August with the first training workshop being conducted South Eleuthera. Another training workshop was conducted and completed in Abaco just in April. To date, some 20 persons have been trained.

Training workshops are currently being planned for North Andros and West Grand Bahama.

**CONSTRUCTION OF ADDITIONAL OFFICE SPACE – DEPARTMENT OF MARINE RESOURCES**

Madam Speaker

During my mid-year 2023/2024 budget presentation work on additional office space at the Department of Marine Resources Head Quarters on East Bay Street was about to begin after several delays. I am happy to report the work has begun and is fast nearing completion. Some $311,240.03 was allocated and approved for the new office space, which is expected to be completed by the end of summer (2024).

**Dolphins**

Madam Speaker

"Pegion," "Justis," "Fiona," "Harry" and "Diamond," 5 Atlantic bottlenose dolphins, previously situated at Blackbeard Cay/Balmoral Island, off the northern coast of New Providence, have garnered much local and international attention. I am ever so thankful to all who expressed genuine interest and offered constructive advice and/or physical assistance, and wish to assure the world that all 5 dolphins remain safe and secure at Atlantis' Animal Care facility, Dolphin Cay.

Dolphin Cay is one of the most sophisticated marine habitats in the world with the Caribbean’s premier marine life rescue and rehabilitation facility offering an extraordinary environment and marine mammal interaction programmes. It is a fully licensed and internationally accredited marine mammal facility, offering immediate expertise, veterinarian assistance in the interest and wellbeing of the dolphins.

Three Days ago, the initial 30 day assessment period ended. We are reviewing recommendations and will make determinations as to the ultimate fate of the dolphins in due course.

**DEPARTMENT OF COOPERATIVES**

Madam Speaker,

During the 2023/2024 fiscal year the Department of Cooperatives accomplished the following:

* The Department has completed its restructuring exercise in alignment with its strategic goals and objectives to improve service quality and delivery time to potential registrants seeking to register as a cooperative;
* The Department has also completed its rebranding to DCD executing its mission to develop, facilitate and regulate;
* The Department launched its first phase of creating a heightened awareness for cooperatives through its advertising campaign with a theme “**How to start a cooperative**” which was aired on the Bahamas Tonight and 104.5 FM radio nationwide from January to March;
* In addition, Madam Speaker the Department has also held numerous public events such as a Corporate Governance and a Regulatory Supervision Workshop to ensure that all cooperatives throughout The Commonwealth of The Bahamas are in compliance to the Cooperative Societies Act, 2005, The Regulations and international best practices;
* For the first time the Department hosted a Coop Conference 2024 under the theme “**Developing** **Circular Economies”**; creating a heightened awareness for all Bahamians to reduce wastage; and partner with the government’s plan of reducing imports by 25% by 2025;

Madam Speaker

Producer-supplier cooperatives are considered non-financial cooperatives and the safety and soundness of the sector’s statutory reserves and members’ share deposits are vital to the continued growth and development of the sector; the Department is in its final stage of rolling out the Apex Body for cooperatives.

This Apex Body, will be responsible for collecting, managing and ensuring that cooperatives receive the requisite resources and develop innovative strategies among its membership to increase cooperative funding of projects and other initiatives.

Madam Speaker

I wish to report that all of the technical staff within the Department have completed the international leadership, CaribDE certification with a focus on leadership development training in managing cooperatives and credit unions.

Madam Speaker

The Department has also been successful in registering four new cooperatives; two in New Providence and two on the island of Andros. Presently, there are an additional two groups in training for registration;

**NEW INITIATIVES- 2024/2025**

Madam Speaker

In the next fiscal year, the Department of Cooperatives have several new initiatives in various levels of development that will come on stream.

Currently no cooperative society has a statutory depository facility to lodge member shares and reserves. My Ministry will seek to revitalize the Apex Body by hosting the **National Cooperative Congress**; a venue that invites all cooperatives to address issues facing the sector. In addition, member cooperatives will be given the opportunity to elect board members and supervisory committees. The umbrella organization once operational will also be able to advocate on matters that affect the continued growth and development of the producer-supplier cooperative movement.

Madam Speaker,

The Department will continue its aggressive empowerment strategy to encourage more Bahamians to start and invest in cooperatives. In 2024-2025, the Department intends to host its Coop Conference in Grand Bahama. This Coop Conference through its lineup of speakers will create an environment of empowerment for Grand Bahamians to become active partners in cooperative development.

Madam Speaker,

To ensure that the sector remains vibrant and that there is long term continuity, the Department hopes to re-launch its Junior Cooperative Program in all high schools throughout The Commonwealth of The Bahamas. Phase I will start with all high schools in New Providence as well as target all of the high schools that currently have agricultural programs.

**ON-GOING INITIATIVES 2024/2025**

Madam Speaker

The Department will conduct 54 annual and follow-up inspections for all registered societies throughout the Commonwealth of The Bahamas; as well as 28 annual inspections and annual general meetings for all youth Cooperatives. In addition, the Regulatory supervision unit will also conduct 45 compliance inspections of all registered cooperatives.

Madam Speaker

My Ministry will seek to complete the Draft 2014 Cooperative Societies Bill and Regulations and bring to Parliament during this upcoming fiscal year. The Bill & Regulations will allow the Department going forward to regulate and supervise based on international standards and best practices; as well as provide a modern regulatory framework for the current dynamic environment.

Madam Speaker

Most excitingly, the DCD is currently engaged with Bahamians who have expressed an interest in forming a cooperative specifically for enhancing 3 local industries - grits, peanuts and coconuts. We are poised to revolutionize sectors of the Bahamian agricultural industry.

Madam Speaker

In 2024, the Department will celebrate its 50th Anniversary of cooperative development in The Bahamas. The celebration includes a cooperative effort with the Bahamas Cooperative League Limited to launch a cadre of events during the year. Some of the activities include a 50th anniversary Awards Luncheon to honor 50 cooperative icons and the Department’s staff.

**Public Markets**

**Madam Speaker**

The Public Markets section of my ministry has direct responsibility for the management, supervision and oversight of Arawak Cay/Fish Fry, Potter’s Cay, the Market at Gladstone Road, and the Blue Hill Road Farmers Market.

These Public Markets play a vital role in The Bahamas’ economy. They offer a variety of products for sale which range from freshly caught fisheries products, fruits and vegetables, to enjoying your favorite freshly prepared or cooked Bahamian cuisines. Public markets also seek to encourage entrepreneurship, create employment and contribute towards our gross domestic product.

**Madam Speaker**

Arawak Cay/Fish Fryis world renowned and is listed as a tourist attraction by the Ministry of Tourism. It has been featured in many tourist guides.

At Arawak Cay, we have continued to upgrade and refurbish the restrooms and have carried out upgrades to the surrounding facilities.

Madam Speaker

We are also addressing the grease clogging problem that exists at Arawak Cay. The grease traps will be cleared, cleaned and maintained on a regular basis. This will minimize the vexing problem of clogged drains, which occur far too frequently.

We have also collaborated with the Water and Sewerage Corporation and the Ministry of Works to assist in addressing the water flow and drainage situation. This work is almost completed. We conducted a survey of all plots/stalls. Through this survey, we are able to accurately request lease rental fees as fees are calculated according to the area a stall occupies.

A number of spotlights were installed to alleviate some of the lighting issues, and we intend to provide additional lighting in the parking lots. This additional lighting would serve to help customers, vendors and tourists feel safe. It would also serve as a crime prevention measure. We also intend to install security cameras to complement our safety strategy.

There is a plan to install fencing in certain areas, which would be beneficial in addressing the issue of vagrants.

We will remove conch shells that is on the northern seawall. Their removal would minimize the possibility of conch poisoning due to algae buildup.

The seawall is in disrepair, therefore, we intend to carry out repairs to this area. We also plan to erect fencing in the area of the seawall. It is also intended that repairs be conducted on the sidewalks..

Madam Speaker

My ministry also intends to tackle the long standing issue of lease renewals, subleasing and new leases to vendors. This along with the backlog of lease renewal fees must be addressed in some way or another. Bringing solution to this issue is extremely important. Vendors will have to settle their affairs or face closure like all other businesses in the country.

Madam Speaker

We are all aware of the popularity of **Potter’s Cay** for locals and visitors alike. In an effort to maintain the area, we have continued to upgrade the restroom facilities, the administration building and the garbage bin area.

We have also executed repairs to the potholes at the main entrance and exit; removed derelict vehicles, pallets and unsightly debris from the garbage bin area and refurbished several lights by Bahamas Power and Light (BPL). A booth was also installed to house our security personnel.

Madam Speaker

There is a need for increased and improved street lighting at Potter's Cay as the existing is inadequate. The implementation of proper lighting would provide better security for customers, vendors and staff.

We also intend to ensure that vendors have access to electricity, so they can rid themselves of portable generator use for power.

Madam Speaker

My ministry intends to install diesel generator to outfit the administration building. This generator would serve to safeguard against power outages and ensure that the restroom facilities and the administration building is not disrupted during power outages.

We intend to outfit Potters Cay with a camera surveillance system that should assist with safety and security to customers, vendors and staff.

We also intend to install proper signage and relevant markings. We also intend to modify the existing fruits and vegetables stalls at Potters Cay.

Madam Speaker

**At the market at Gladstone Road** vendors provide a variety of products for sale on Saturdays. While fruits and vegetables are the focus at this market, you can also find food processing products, body products, ornamental plants and handicrafts.

Upgrades are being made to this market and its surrounding facilities. Electricity, plumbing and painting has been addressed at this site. This market is expanding.

Madam Speaker

An audit of this market has been completed. The necessary agreements are currently being finalized in order for vendors to begin paying rental fees.

Madam Speaker

**The Blue Hill Road Farmers Market** was transferred to my ministry around September 2022. The purpose of the transfer was to bring focus and structure to this market. To this end, a market manager was appointed to oversee its daily operations.

A general cleanup of the market and other drainage works were recently carried out.

We intend to totally redesign this market to include an administration building to house the market manager and his staff, new stall designs and layout, landscaping and fencing, parking, kiddies corner, etc.

We intend to provide for the collection and disposal of garbage, as well as provide security services.

There is much work to be done at this market that we will begin to carry out with the assistance of the relevant other government agencies.

**DIGITIZATION OF ONLINE SERVICES AND MANUAL RECORDS**

Madam Speaker,

A new Digitization Unit has been established within the Ministry of Agriculture and Marine Resources in keeping with the government’s mandate and to increase overall efficiency and ensure ease of doing business for our clients both locally and internationally. By so doing, my Ministry continues to break the status quo by bridging the gap for its valuable clients with the provision of various online applications for permits, licenses and registration.

My ministry has a total of 29 services launched overall. The Department of Agriculture has 13 online services. The Department of Marine Resources has 14 online services and the Ministry 2 online services. The Ministry of Agriculture and Marine can boast of having the most services on the MyGateway Platform and we are actively looking to provide additional online service offerings in the coming months.

Madam Speaker

The hardworking men and women in the farming and fishing industries, as well as local businesses and the general public now have a convenient way to access the services they need to operate and succeed and we are happy to serve them.

Currently, we have processed over ***11,000*** applications made ***online*** and almost $***116,000*** in revenue received, which represents fees associated with permits and licenses. New Providence, Abaco and Grand Bahama account for the majority of applications submitted **for Agriculture Import permits**, but we are hoping to see a significant uptick from the other Family Islands as we endeavor within the coming **months to foster greater public awareness.**

Madame Speaker

The Digitization of the Ministry’s entire manual file records will serve to digitally capture information in the business units internal Registries and provide greater efficiencies for collaboration and accountability. It will also automate the workflow of business processes relative to approval for key transactions and decision making.

**LEGAL & COMPLIANCE**

This new Unit “**Digitization, Legal, Compliance and Planning Unit**” will seek to ensure that all legal matters, amendment to existing laws and regulations as well as disputes related to the Ministry of Agriculture and Marine Resources are followed through expeditiously and in direct consultation with the respective divisions within the Office of the Attorney General Office.

Madam Speaker

The adoption of compliance management oversight is critical to maintain public trust while delivering key services within my Ministry and incorporates developing policies and procedures to ensure compliance with regulations, conducting audits and implementing corrective actions where necessary **in accordance with stipulated policy and law**. It also entails educating and training employees and stakeholders about their responsibilities related to compliance

**Policy and Planning**

Madam Speaker

The Policy, Planning and Research Unit is responsible for providing research, policy and programming on priority areas of the Ministry. Over the past six months, focus has been placed on:

1. Strengthening the Pineapple Industry in Eleuthera;
2. Empowering livestock farmers on animal nutrition, feed and disaster risk management;
3. Supporting the National Poultry Sector;
4. Enhancing Digital Agriculture Technologies; and
5. Engaging youth in agriculture through Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs)

Madam Speaker

The persistent negative impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on agrifood systems, compounded by ongoing conflicts among major agricultural producing countries, has led to heightened food prices and disruptions in supply chains. This scenario continues to expose the fragility and shortcomings of the Bahamian food system, underscoring the pressing need for urgent improvement. Recognizing the realities faced by The Bahamas and the world at large, the Ministry is diligently working towards enhancing the current system. The goal is to establish a more sustainable, inclusive, and resilient framework that ensures the availability and accessibility of nutritious foods for all, capable of withstanding economic, environmental, and social shocks. We recognize that it cannot be business as usual and so we have started a number of pertinent projects.

*New and Continuous Projects from July 2023 to January 2024*

**Strengthening the Pineapple Industry in Eleuthera**

Madam Speaker

In January of this year, the Ministry engaged a Bahamian agricultural company named - “Island Foodology”, to conduct a feasibility study to determine opportunities to increase pineapple production in Eleuthera and develop a project design to aid solutions. Soil samples from fifteen (15) pineapple farms were gathered and their soil vitality is being tested - understanding soil health is key to sustainable long-term production. With the results from the soil test, the Ministry will implement an intense training program for pineapple farmers to aid production challenges, increase harvests and develop a contract farming programme. Further to the immediate implementation of the training program, the Ministry is devising a two-year strategic plan for the pineapple industry that will include the establishment of a pineapple processing facility for value-added pineapple products to be sold; a pineapple nursery for distribution and purchase of improved genetic materials; also to introduce a new pineapple variety that is more resilient to climate changes. These measures will be conducted with the aim to reduce the import of pineapples by 10% by 2026.

**Empowering livestock farmers on animal nutrition, feed and disaster risk management**

Madam Speaker

As part of the Ministry’s commitment to working towards the Sustainable Development Goals, the Policy and Planning Unit has initiated several projects to address SGD 13 Climate Action, in agriculture. The Livestock Disaster Risk Management project aims to build capacity of farmers and extension officers to reduce feed and production cost and adapt to climate change conditions; equipping them with necessary skills on livestock management, agricultural activities including composting technologies for fodder and forage bank production.

In February, the webinar training series was held and attended by over one hundred (100) Bahamian livestock farmers. Some of the topics covered included *Feed Formulation 101*’; ‘*Management of Nutritional Needs for Stages of livestock Growth*; and ‘*Alternative Livestock Feeding Solutions for The Bahamas’*.

This training programme continued with in-person workshops that took place in New Providence, Grand Bahama, and Abaco on topics such as - silage production, urea treatment, preservation of fish residue, duckweed lemna and more. From these online and in-person training, a comprehensive manual and instructional videos were developed. These resources, combined with the accessibility of webinar and workshop contents online, will continue to serve as valuable tools for agricultural practitioners across The Bahamas, facilitating ongoing learning and skills development in sustainable farming practices of livestock feeding.

**Supporting the National Poultry Sector**

Madam Speaker

To reduce food and nutrition insecurity through improved poultry production and productivity, the Ministry will partner with the Caribbean Agriculture Research and Development Institute (CARDI) on the HENS Poultry Project. This project is designed:

1. To conduct training needs assessment within the islands of New Providence, Grand Bahama and Abaco targeting relevant stakeholders (producers, extension officers, backyard farmers/enthusiasts);
2. To assist the Ministry in building awareness on good agricultural practices in poultry production; and
3. To train producers, extension officers and backyard farmers/enthusiasts in poultry production management (layers and broilers) on the island of Grand Bahama and develop videos for national training.

This collaborative initiative aims to fortify our agricultural landscape, and we look forward to the positive impact it will have on the sustainable development of poultry production.

**Enhancing Digital Agriculture Technologies**

Madam Speaker

The Ministry through the UN Food and Agriculture Organization's (FAO) technical cooperation programme launched a Digital Village pilot in Eleuthera to advance inclusive digital agriculture solutions for the island's agrifood system. This initiative encompasses conducting a feasibility analysis and providing key recommendations for digital agriculture solutions in five rural communities on Eleuthera, focusing on agribusinesses, fisheries, and agritourism. Additionally, the project involves piloting a Digital Territorial Hub to foster linkages between rural-urban communities, particularly for agribusiness scaling up. Furthermore, the program aims to contribute to the development of a National Agribusiness Policy and legislative framework, emphasizing digital agriculture extension services to foster effective and diverse growth in the agriculture and fisheries sector, with a specific focus on agro-technology.

**Engaging youth in agriculture through ICTS**

Madam Speaker

We cannot expect to change the status quo in our agrifood system if we do not involve our youth. The Ministry remains committed to promoting the agriculture sector as a viable career to our young persons. As such we are working alongside the Bahamian non-profit - ‘FEMSTEM Bahamas’ - to host an Agriculture Youth Hack-a-thon two-day event. The aim is to host a Mini Hackathon which focuses on combating climate change challenges in the Bahamian agriculture sector. This event targets school students in grades 10-12.

**BAHAMAS AGRICULTURE AND MARINE SCIENCE INSTITUTE**

Madam Speaker

The Bahamas Agriculture and Marine Science Institute (BAMSI) has made significant strides in advancing agricultural and marine education, fostering research, and supporting sustainable practices.

**Degree Programs**

Madam Speaker

As the only tertiary level institution in The Bahamas offering unique degree programs in agriculture, art and the environment, business management, general agriculture, agribusiness, aquaculture, agronomy, animal science, marine science, and environmental science, BAMSI is committed to driving innovation, research, and community engagement. BAMSI credits are transferable worldwide and its students are in demand.

Madam Speaker

I am ever so proud to add my congratulations to these young persons who successfully completed programmes at BAMSI and graduated almost a month ago.

BAMSI continuously seeks success. On May 16th BAMSI graduated 8 students with degrees in Agribusiness, Agriculture Business Management, Environmental Science, and Marine Science. Graduates are already gainfully employed within their field or have already been accepted into universities abroad for further studies.

LIST OF 2024 GRADUATES

I wish to again encourage all young Bahamians, especially those in Centreville, to seriously consider taking advantage of these wonderful opportunities for educational advancement.

New Degree programs are being created and offered this coming Fall semester. Register today as be eligible for the Government Tertiary Education Grant which affords Bahamian students free tuition for their degree studies at BAMSI.

**Certificate Programs**

Certification is also available in Agriculture; Backyard Farming; Aquaculture; Horticulture These are unique certificate programs that meet the needs of the country; and because of the the demand of the Bahamian consumer - new courses are added regularly: Courses include:

**Specialized National Professional Certifications**

**National Flats Fishing Guide Certification**

Madam Speaker

BAMSI is also offering national professional certifications. The next cohort of the National Flats Fishing (aka Fly-fishing) Certification starts July 2024, it is open to Bahamians 18 years and older across the archipelago. This training was approved and endorsed by the Ministry of Tourism, Investments, and Aviation, and the Ministry of Agriculture and Marine Resources and the National Audubon Society.

On January 29th of this year, BAMSI graduated 40 trained and certified flats fishing and nature tour guides. The cohort consisted of 30% women graduates, which was a first of its kind. **Additionally, this certification training is the first for this country and the only national flats training in the world.**

Countries have already expressed an interest to BAMSI to assist with the development of their programs. BAMSI is a world-class pacesetter. The institute also initiated a certification program for veteran fly-fishing guides with over 10 years of experience, starting September 2024.

Additionally, Madam Speaker, BAMSI has launched a new cohort for certification program with field skills sessions in New Providence, Grand Bahama and Eleuthera beginning in September 2024.

Madam Speaker

As previously mentioned, we cannot change the status quo without involving our youth. Therefore, BAMSI has enrolled high school students in college-level courses, enhancing college readiness and academic advancement. Courses include college prep math, English, chemistry, biology or college level courses and noncredit certificate programs. High School students pay a reduced rate to assist their academic pursuits.

Additionally, BAMSI has offered the Summer Educational Enrichment and Discovery Series (SEEDS) immersion camp for high school students and the College Readiness Outreach Program (CROP), engaging numerous students in preparatory activities.

Madam Speaker

The promised Agriculture Cadet Program will launch this new school year to enhance the interest and skills of high school students and to introduce them to the art, science and discipline of agriculture.

**Fall 2024 Registration**

BAMSI invites prospective students to register for the Fall 2024 semester, with a wide range of programs designed to meet the educational and professional needs of The Bahamas' agricultural and marine sectors and much more. Students also have the option of enjoying the beautiful campus and student clubs and activities.

**Research and Publications**

Madam Speaker, BAMSI faculty have published in international journals like the Canadian Journal of Zoology and the Journal of Fish Biology. Research initiatives include: Spiny Lobster Nurseries; Mangrove Restoration and FAO research projects.

**Collaborations and MOUs**

BAMSI has established memorandum of understanding (MOUs) with:

- Botswana University of Agriculture and Natural Resources (BUAN)

- Cape Eleuthera Institute

- One Eleuthera Foundation

- National Audubon Society to promote bird-based tourism and strengthen educational initiatives.

- Mediterranean Shipping Container (MSc) Foundation

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**Research and Demonstration Farm**

**Seedling Program**

Madam Speaker

The BAMSI Seedling Program plays a crucial role in supporting local farmers by providing high-quality seedlings. This program selects the highest-grade seeds, which are disease-resistant and guarantee high germination rates. The seedlings are grown in shadehouses on various Family Islands and distributed to farmers free of charge. **Over the past year, the program has distributed over 14,000 seedlings to farmers and backyard garden enthusiasts.**

**Livestock Improvement**

Madam Speaker

BAMSI is enhancing the genetic potential of local livestock by acquiring purebred rams, bucks, boars, and sows. These animals are used to improve the genetic diversity of local herds and flocks through natural breeding and artificial insemination. BAMSI also focuses on improving feed availability by introducing high-protein legumes and pasture species, particularly for the dry winter months. This ensures that livestock are well-fed year-round, enhancing their productivity and health.

**Poultry Unit and Egg Production**

BAMSI has answered the clarion call for more locally produced poultry products. There is the Eggcademy which houses nearly 3000 birds and is responsible for its sought after BAMSI eggs, laid fresh in the Bahamas.

**Extension Services and Training**

BAMSI's Extension Services arm extends its reach to most major islands, including North Andros, South Andros, Cat Island, Eleuthera, and Long Island. Plans are underway to include Abaco, Grand Bahama, and Exuma. Extension officers engage directly with farmers and fisherfolk, providing training and support for various agricultural practices. This includes data collection, project implementation, and practical demonstrations of efficient farming techniques.

**Breadfruit Initiative**

BAMSI's Breadfruit Initiative aims to reduce the national food import bill by increasing the local production of breadfruit, a versatile and nutrient-rich food source. Extension officers have planted over 150 breadfruit trees on Cat Island, with plans to expand to other Family Islands. Each tree can produce approximately 200 fruits per season, providing a significant local food source and reducing reliance on imported starches like potatoes and rice.

**Sustainable Practices and New Agriculture Practices**

Madam Speaker

BAMSI is on the cutting edge of agricultural technology, demonstrating and implementing new methods such as containerized farming and advanced aquaponics systems. These technologies will be made available to BAMSI students and the Bahamian community, ensuring that local farmers have access to the latest advancements in sustainable agriculture.

By providing high-quality inputs, advanced training, and sustainable practices, BAMSI significantly enhances the productivity and resilience of local farms, contributing to food security and economic growth in The Bahamas.

**Containerized Farming**

Madam Speaker,

The recent acquisition of two container farms from Eeden Farms for the Andros Campus and Eleuthera represent a paradigm shift in the way we approach agriculture and food production and will revolutionize the agricultural landscape of the Bahamas.

By harnessing the power of hydroponics, vertical farming, and controlled environment agriculture, container farms enable us to overcome the traditional limitations imposed by climate, soil quality, and land availability. They offer a sustainable solution for cultivating a diverse range of crops year-round, thereby bolstering food security, reducing dependency on imports, and enhancing the resilience of local food systems.

The integration of container farms into BAMSI's educational curriculum, research programs, and community outreach initiatives will serve as a catalyst for knowledge dissemination, skill development, and capacity building. By empowering future generations of farmers, scientists, and agricultural practitioners, BAMSI will play a pivotal role in driving positive change and fostering sustainable development across The Bahamas.

Madam Speaker,

BAMSI is also encouraging Bahamians to delve into **Aquaponics**: Demonstrating the production of salad greens, microgreens, and spices in protected water conserving environments, and also **Coconut Cultivation**: Introducing the Brazilian Green Dwarf coconut variety, which is resistant to lethal yellowing disease, and can serve to replace dying native coconut trees.

**New Facilities**

**Madam Speaker**

BAMSI has expanded its campus.The new field station center at Stafford Creek, Andros, enhances BAMSI's capacity with wet and dry labs and classrooms supporting marine science, environmental science, and sustainable tourism programs.

Ground breaking was also held in Long Island for a multipurpose training center.

**New Piggery on North Andros Campus**

BAMSI continues to be a catalyst in achieving the government’s goal to reduce the food import bill by 25% before 2025. Through education, research, and extension activities, BAMSI supports local producers and contributes significantly to food security and economic growth in The Bahamas. The institute’s ongoing efforts in education, sustainable practices, and community engagement exemplify its commitment to the development of the agriculture and marine science sectors. The institute is well on its way to Changing the Status Quo, Changing Lives and we are excited for the institute’s future.

Madam Speaker,

**Donation of Shade Houses**

Only a few days ago, BAMSI donated shade houses to the Athur’s Town Comprehensive School and the Old Bight High School. Students will learn how to maximize crop production in a controlled environment.

**THE BAHAMAS AGRICULTURAL AND INDUSTRIAL CORPORATION (BAIC)**

Madam Speaker

Spanning across six (6) major islands of The Bahamas including New Providence, Grand Bahama, Abaco, Andros, Exuma and of course Eleuthera, BAIC is impacting all of these islands per their mandate and in particular, their **agricultural interventions**, **orange economy initiatives**, **numerous training programs** and **business creation opportunities.**

Madam Speaker

I can tell you unreservedly that BAIC has made significant advances in the projects and programs under its remit. A number of these projects are historical “first time” projects, or focus on long-outstanding matters. There is much heavy lifting taking place there, with much of this work being a source of pride for my Ministry.

Some of the more notable projects and programs underway at BAIC are as follows;

* FOR THE FIRST TIME IN APPROXIMATELY FORTY YEARS, the Government of the Bahamas via BAIC purchased from India and imported into the Bahamas, new Animal Feed Milling equipment, in December 2023
* the new Animal Feed Mill building (steel structure and roof) is scheduled to be imported from the United States in the coming months and be erected to house the new Animal Feed Mill.

Madam Speaker

I am pleased to advise you that preliminary discussion are underway on introducing Agriculture Insurance for Crops and Livestock. This would be a major milestone for the agricultural sector in The Bahamas.

Madam Speaker

Notably, in early 2024 BAIC’s Board of Directors acted with prudence and mandated that all Farmers selling crops to the Family Island Packing Houses, be paid no later than 30 days after invoice (if less than $300 in sales value) or 45 days after invoice (where sales exceed $300). This mandate has cured years of delayed payment to farmers, sometimes being as late as 90 or 120 days. Continued efforts are being made to further reduce wait times.

Similarly, BAIC has worked to significantly reduce the Animal Feed order fulfillment time for Family Island Farmers. Historically, family island farmers have had to wait for months for the delivery of feed paid for in advance. Management has advised that family island farmers are now receiving their animal feed orders within 30 days of payment in the vast majority of cases.

Madam Speaker

As deeper focus is placed on the needs of Family Island farmers, in the upcoming Budget period, BAIC intends to decentralize its Fish and Farm Store operations. Currently family island customers are required to place orders for a variety of farm input supplies from the Fish and Farm Store located on Potter’s Cay Dock. Madam Speaker, FOR THE FIRST TIME EVER, Fish and Farm Store Depots will be established across a number of Family Islands, thereby bringing a modern approach and convenience to the growth and development of Family Island agriculture.

Madam Speaker

Additionally, I am pleased to report that BAIC is continuing to refine a **NATIONAL CROP CALENDAR**. They are also engaged with proposing a system of Grades and Standards for crops received by the Packing Houses so that the farmers producing the better crops will receive the better prices. This is a significant change from the one price for all grades of crops which has been in effect for decades.

Madam Speaker

I must congratulate BAIC on the holding of its 3rd Annual Taste and Tell Food Processing event in April of this year. This event which shines the light on local food processors, is intended to be the bridge between processors and the food store shelves via heightened public awareness and demand, along with the strategic partnership with Milo Butler and Sons Ltd. for wider and increased locally produced processed food items distribution.

During this year, the Corporation’s Orange Economy Development Department of BAICs hosted a number of Arts and Crafts training seminars in New Providence and the Family Islands. Topics such as Candle Making, Straw Craft, Soap Making and Shell Craft.

Madam Speaker

BAIC in its efforts to maximize the opportunities for its local artisans and orange economy participants, will be hosting another event in what they call their “…And Tell” series.

Thus, the Second Annual **“SMELL AND TELL”** will bring together local artisans in the creative economy who specialize in the production of candles, soaps, lotions, potpourri, perfumes and/or colognes etc. Just like the Taste and Tell, this event seeks to bring together the public, retailers and wholesalers to sample and patronize the artisans. I am told Madam Speaker, that this event is in the planning stages for later in the year.

Madam Speaker

I am pleased to advise that the **LEASE AGREEMENT BETWEEN BAIC AND THE BAHAMAS NATIONAL TRUST (BNT) FOR 548 ACRE SWEETINGS POND AND SURROUNDS IN HATCHET BAY ELEUTHERA** has seen the commencement of preliminary works for the official development of the Park.

**Having the largest aggregation of Seahorses in the world, Sweeting’s Pond at Seahorse National Park is a wonder of nature which deserves the attention, designation and focused effort it is receiving.**

Seahorse National Park at Sweetings Pond, will feature an eco-sensitive management of the pond by the BNT, along with walking trails, a gift shop, local arts and crafts artisans and a farmers market for sale of local produce, among other features.

Madam Speaker

After twelve months of almost weekly demonstrations of gratitude, BAIC concludes its 50 Acts of Love & Service staff led program, which commenced in July of 2023.

This initiative saw BAIC employees make meaningful contributions to selected and random agencies as well as individuals, from funds raised among themselves. Items donated and/or provided included fFoodstuff to Old Folks Homes; Books donated to schools; Cleaning supplies for Children’s Homes; Breakfast meals for police officers; Reading to students; Cleaning the premises of Old Folks Homes; Animal Feed donation to Farmers; Farming inputs donated to churches; etc. Also, random payment of lunch cost, gas cost, produce costs for example, by employees for members of the public. This, all to express their gratitude to the nation and their fellow citizens on the occasion of our Nation’s 50th Anniversary of Independence.

Madam Speaker

I am delighted to advise that FOR THE FIRST TIME, BAIC is in the final stages of the Terms of Reference with the Inter-American Bank (Washington DC Officials) for a Five (5) year Strategic Plan initiated by BAIC, but being funded by them. This plan will set out the strategic agenda (in collaboration with the MOAMR) for BAIC for the coming five year period. All levels of staff, management, its Board and external stakeholders will contribute to this plan.

**BAHAMAS AGRICULTURAL HEALTH AND FOOD SAFETY AUTHORITY**

Madam Speaker

The Bahamas Agricultural Health & Food Safety Authority, known as BAHFSA, is not just an organization, but a crucial pillar in our society. It plays a pivotal role in ensuring Plant and Animal Health and Food Safety, a mandate that has become more crucial than ever in our changing world. The importance of BAHFSA's work cannot be overstated, as it directly impacts the health and safety of our citizens and the sustainability of our agricultural sector.

BAHFSA has successfully transitioned into their new office building, providing a more conducive work environment for our dedicated staff and enhancing our operational efficiency. The new facility is fully equipped to issue phytosanitary certificates, a crucial document that indicates that consignments for export meet specified phytosanitary import requirements of exporting countries ensuring the safety and quality of our agricultural products. BAHFSA is located 99 Crawford Street, Oakes Field.

Madam Speaker

This year, BAHFSA is not just embracing technology, but revolutionizing the Agricultural Health and Food Safety System. We are digitizing the permitting and inspection system, a transformation that will not only streamline the process but also make it more convenient for the public. No longer will the public have to endure long queues or visit multiple departments to apply for permits and inspections. This is a significant step towards a more efficient and modern agricultural sector and a testament to our commitment to serving the public better.

Secondly, BAHFSA's vision is guided by the One Health Approach to Diagnostic Reform, a strategic initiative that underscores our commitment to protect the Bahamas against agricultural threats and facilitate agricultural expansion through diagnostic services.

Our vision is to address the severe diagnostic gap that has plagued the country for years. BAHFSA will construct a One Health Laboratory covering Food Safety, Plant Health and Veterinary Health. This laboratory will be the first in the region to lead CARICOM in modern diagnostics, given the escalating threats from staple foods like contaminated baby formula, bird flu that can decimate our flamingo and poultry population, and plant diseases that pose a grave risk to our banana population.

The urgency of equipping BAHFSA with the tools to protect the Bahamian population cannot be overstated. This is a testament to this government's proactive stance in safeguarding our agricultural sector. The first phase of construction is estimated to begin at the end of 2024.

Madame Speaker

In continuation of the government's efforts towards food security, BAHFSA will also build the country's first-ever Plant Diagnostic Center at its headquarters on Crawford Street. This centre is not just a physical structure but a critical component of our strategy for detecting, identifying, and characterizing plant pests.

These pests, which may be associated with imports of agricultural consignments, pose significant risks to our agricultural health and environmental sustainability. The centre will also provide advice on control methods that minimize these risks. Qualified Bahamians will be hired and trained in the latest pest surveillance and monitoring methods, molecular techniques, and insect identification; we aim to enhance BAHFSA's capabilities and competencies. This initiative will strengthen the country's plant health capacity, meet the requirements for regional and international trade, and improve our export capacity. BAHFSA estimates completion of the Diagnostic Center by February 2025.

Madame Speaker

Another BAHFSA initiative is establishing an Educational Outreach program, a crucial endeavour to raise national consciousness on the importance of plant health. The objective is to educate domestic and international travelers on the dangers of carrying food, plants or other agricultural items in their luggage or packages containing harmful pests and diseases, which can harm agriculture, the environment and the economy. Infographics, posters, and literature will be placed at all ports in the country to inform the public.

Madame Speaker

As you may have heard, several infectious diseases spreading globally threaten the health of animals and thus pose a threat through importation. BAHFSA’s Veterinary Services has already modernized our import policies to meet international standards so that we are protected from dangerous imports. Furthermore, BAHFSA’s veterinary services will be applying the latest technologies to increase surveillance for diseases such as Avian Influenza, which can not only affect animals but potentially spread to humans. With these initiatives, BAHFSA’s Veterinary Services hopes to lead the region in Veterinary Public Health.

Madame Speaker

In addition to threats posed to animal and human health through infectious diseases, long-term detrimental health consequences can result from foodborne illnesses, food additives, toxins and other banned substances in foods. BAHFSA has embarked on an aggressive education and training program with our key government and private sector stakeholders. This multi-sectoral training will increase our capacity for monitoring and surveillance of food imports and better assess risk to reduce the incidence of foodborne illnesses.

Madame Speaker

Food Safety & Quality is a major challenge along the food chain. To safeguard public health and ensure consumer interests are met, several staff have already commenced, and others will continue to be trained as designated food inspectors to act on BAHFSAs behalf in strengthening the AHFS system and to address some of the gaps identified in the Food Control System Assessment by the FAO. The training process includes ensuring our designated food inspectors have the necessary skills and knowledge to uphold the highest food safety standards.

Madame Speaker

A list of substances currently banned in other countries yet still appearing in many food products consumed by Bahamians, has been compiled. By publishing and enforcing the removal of certain products from the local and international market and having the diagnostic capacity to monitor and surveil such products, these products will no longer threaten consumers.

With the completion of the One Health Diagnostic Laboratory, BAHFSA will be able to complete more comprehensive analyses of food imports and locally produced food and crops. This will result in improved market access for Bahamian products.

**Proposed Veterinary Medical Act**

Madam Speaker

The Veterinarian Surgeons Act (1966) is in dire need of modernization which the draft Veterinarian Medical Act (2024) seeks to address with updates and advancements in the administration of veterinarians and related purposes. That's 58 year since any advancements! The draft bill has been reviewed and is supported by the Veterinary Medical Association of the Bahamas (VMAB), and awaiting final vetting by the Office of the Attorney General before tabling in this very House.

**Other Projects:**

**Sustainable Food Growth Grant**

Madam Speaker

Recently, the Ministry of Agriculture and Marine Resources partnered with the Access Accelerator Small Business Development Center to distribute up to $40,000 in funding for the Sustainable Food Grant. The grant is meant to support food producers in farming and fishing who align with our goal of food security in The Bahamas. Over 200 persons from around the islands applied for the grant with Grand Bahama having the most applicants at 80 and New Providence having 78 applicants. The approved islands are as follows:

 **Approved applicants per island:**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| New Providence | 12 |
| Grand Bahama | 12 |
| Abaco | 1 |
| Ragged Island | 1 |
| Eleuthera | 6 |
| Exuma | 1 |
| Long Island | 4 |
| Cat Island | 3 |
| Berry Islands | 1 |
| Andros | 2 |

**Approved applicants per industry:**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Fishing | 27 |
| Agriculture | 16 |
|  |  |

Madam Speaker

We note that this programme was oversubscribed, which underscores the vast interest of Bahamians across the country to be food producers. It is our hope that we present a third round of grants to reach as many budding and established businesses around the Commonwealth of The Bahamas.

**Agrarian Awards & Anchor Awards**

Madam Speaker

The Agrarian Awards was the first ever award ceremony that recognized excellence in Agriculture in our country. The awards were held on September 16, 2023. Through this award show and through the title sponsor the Agriculture Development Organization (ADO), farmers across the country were awarded over $50,000 in cash and prizes. The successful event received ravereviews and we are looking forward to hosting the event again in 2025.

Madame Speaker

In the meantime, my Ministry is seeking to do a similar award ceremony with fishers during the upcoming months, with the Anchor Awards scheduled to be held in December this year. Madam Speaker, award shows for farmers and fishers is an excellent way to recognize and incentivize their hard work and dedication. By providing monetary prizes through sponsorships, the Ministry is seeking to uplift individuals by increasing motivation and encouraging innovation in agriculture and fishing. Additionally, these award shows are raising awareness about the importance of farming and fishing to The Bahamas and highlight the valuable contributions of these remarkable individuals to our society.

**CARIBBEAN WEEK OF AGRICULTURE (CWA) 2023**

Madam Speaker,

The Caribbean Week of Agriculture (CWA) is the premier event on the regional agricultural Calendar. It provides a forum for the key decision-makers in the public and the private sector within the Region, to highlight the importance of Agriculture and rural life to the economic, social and environmental stability of our Member States. It also affords the major stakeholders in Agriculture and related Sectors to have an opportunity to forge a common vision for the development of agriculture and the enhancement of rural life

The Ministry of Agriculture and Marine Resources under the auspices of The Bahamas Government was most pleased to host the 17th CWA Symposium during October 9th – 13th, 2023 at the Breezes SuperClubs Resort Hotel under the theme “**ACCELERATING VISION 25 BY 2025”.**

Some Six hundred (600) plus delegates inclusive of members of the Diplomatic Core as well as Ministers of Agriculture throughout the Caribbean attended the week long Agri-related fully subscribed working sessions/workshops. An exhibition featuring various local and overseas artisans/entrepreneurs was also showcased throughout the week.

Based on the letters of appreciation and the numerous expressions of commendation received from our Regional and local stakeholders, and the continued interest expressed by the members of the general public CWA 2023 was no doubt not only a resounding success but a memorable one for attendees indeed.

**AGRI-BUSINESS EXPO 2024**

Madame Speaker

The Ministry of Agriculture and Marine Resources recently hosted a much awaited and highly successful Agri-Business Expo, the first held since the Pandemic, under the theme “Agriculture is Bahamian Culture”. Thousands of Bahamians, Residents and Tourists alike visited the Gladstone Road Farmers Market Site during the two (2) days event held on April 12th & 13th, 2024. The main thrust of the Expo was to create greater awareness among Bahamians regarding the adoption of our rich heritage and cultural agricultural practices while incorporating innovative and modern methods via engaging and interactive farming, and other related lectures and various hands on demonstrations. Additionally, the Agri-Business Expo served to provide a platform for our farmers, fishers and artisans, some eighty-plus participants in total which allowed them the opportunity to promote their Bahamian grown and prepared products while empowering them economically.

Madam Speaker

Major highlights during the Expo included various culinary demos, culinary battle of the Islands (a neew initiative), Taste of the Islands (another new Initiative where representatives from 4 Islands participated by showcasing their unique food commodities, produce and products), the kiddie’s corner and the water melon eating contest for both Adults and Children alike.

As a result of the Agri-Business Expo, my Ministry has seen a major interest expressed by members of the general public and organizations via telecom, emails and office visits regarding how one can participate during future Expos, acquire information pertaining to Agriculture and related initiatives such as “back yard farming” and how to go about applying for agricultural farm land. This speak volumes to the continuous progress made by my Ministry in their ongoing quest to promote and achieve greater levels of food security.

Madame Speaker,

Our offices have moved to a new location at One Montague Place on the third floor. This new office will serve as a new suitable space for both our employees and stakeholders.

**CONCLUSION**

Madam Speaker

The attention that this administration has paid to ensuring that we are advancing every effort that aids in the lowering of our food import bill is bearing fruit. Several years ago, we were importing nearly $1 billion in food. According to statistics from the Bahamas National Statistical Institute we now import some $761 million in food. It is imperative that not only this administration but successive governments realize the importance of the work of the Ministry of Agriculture and Marine Resources, its departments and agencies to the economy of this country and the health and sustenance of our people.

Another example of our commitment to agriculture and fisheries are the tax concessions outlined in the budget communication on items used by fishers like fishing poles, refrigerated trucks, sumps, aquariums, fractionators, protein skimmers, aquaculture heaters and other items used within the fishing industry. This budget also removes the bond requirement for authorized manufacturers and removes customs duties on parts for machinery under the Industries Encouragement Act. This demonstrates our commitment to assisting Bahamians in their entrepreneurial endeavors especially in manufacturing which will aid in the creation of processed food and other items right here in The Bahamas.

Madam Speaker

I take this opportunity to thank every person who works in the Ministry of Agriculture and Marine Resources, its Departments and agencies for their handwork and commitment to the goal of food security and industry advancement. I greatly appreciate your efforts.

Madam Speaker

As the minister responsible for this portfolio I am doing my best to further the work of my predecessors and provide a sure foundation for those who will follow me in the future. In my short time at the helm of this ministry, I have had the pleasure of meeting many Bahamians eager to begin their agri-businesses and fisheries endeavors. I have marveled at the ingenuity of our people and the near miracles that can occur when we work together toward a common goal. We must continue to work together and I encourage more Bahamians to partner with each other to make their dreams of ownership a reality whether that be in agriculture, fisheries, cooperative development, real estate development, tourism related businesses etc.

Madam Speaker

There is no doubt that this administration is changing the status quo and thereby changing the lives of many Bahamians. The landmark pieces of legislation that has been brought to this place in the past two and a half years has provided the legal framework for change. The agreements entered into with foreign and domestic partners for the development of projects that will provide good jobs for Bahamians will change the economic status of many households. The creation of industries like the cannabis industry and the expansion of the agriculture industry are providing opportunities for entrepreneurship and creativity, things are changing for the better.

Madam Speaker

Positive, progressive change is the way of the Progressive Liberal Party, change is what this party was created to do. It was 15th October 1973 when the Rt. Hon. Sir Lynden Pindling said, “this party was born out of the absolute necessity felt by the masses in the country to bring about a change. This Party was weaned on the hopes and aspirations of the people being symbolized by the Party. This Party attained manhood on the solid achievements it made for and on behalf of the people. “

Colleagues, we must remember the legacy on which we stand. It is a bold legacy. It is a noble legacy. It is one that I am proud to further for a new generation of Bahamians who are looking to this administration for better and more. We cannot let them down. Ours was not an easy task two and a half years ago and it remains complex and arduous but well worth it when those who have benefited from our efforts tell of their triumphs. We must ensure that Bahamians are aware of what is available, of what we have accomplished for them and that there is much more to come.

We have come too far to turn back now.

God bless Centreville, God bless the Ministry of Agriculture and Marine Resources, God bless every persons involved in the agriculture and fisheries industries, and God bless the Commonwealth of The Bahamas!

Madam Speaker.