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**Prime Minister and Minister for Finance, Strategic Planning, National Development and Statistics, Public Service, Peoples Charter for Change and Progress, Information, iTaukei Affairs, Sugar Industry and Lands and Mineral Resources**

**SPEECH AT THE LAUNCHING OF FIJI CROP AND LIVESTOCK COUNCIL OFFICES**

12 Walu Street, Marine Drive Fri. 28th March, 2014

LAUTOKA 1200 Hours

Bula vinaka and good afternoon to you all.

It’s a pleasure to be in Lautoka today to open the Fiji Crop and Livestock Council’s new offices.

The importance that my Government places on farming and agriculture cannot be overstated.

In a country blessed with so much fertile land, there’s no reason why we can’t grow the food we need as a country here at home.

And there’s no reason that on top of that we can’t grow food for our Tourism Industry and food for export as well.

Specialists call this issue “food security.” What that means is guaranteeing enough crops and livestock to feed our population without relying on imports. It’s one of the biggest challenges that any country will face in the 21st century and Fiji is no exception. At the moment, we depend too much on imported food.

But it’s not only about food security. Locally grown food is also less expensive, buying it supports local families and improves our balance of payment position.

For all these reasons, promoting “Fijian Grown”, “Buy Fijian” is a no brainer.

That’s why my Government has made supporting agriculture and assisting our farmers one of our top priorities.

We want farmers to be successful and to earn a living that can support them and their families. And we want all Fijians to benefit from growing more food locally.

To make farming a profitable profession in today’s world however, often takes more than just planting a few seeds or cuttings or getting a few cattle or goats.

Farming today is a highly specialised skill and farmers need the proper training and assistance in order to do the job they’re expected to do and to achieve the results they’re hoping to achieve. Running a farm is a business and farmers need to be commercially savvy.

So one of my Government’s most important jobs is equipping farmers with the tools, education and support they deserve to give them sustained livelihoods and boost our nation’s food security in the process.

The bottom line is that together we need to modernise the Industry and make it more productive.

This brings us to today, the opening of the Fiji Crop and Livestock Council’s new offices that will significantly enhance the services available to its members.

For those of you who don’t know, the Council represents farmers and works with Government to find solutions that will grow their businesses.

In 2010, my Government gave the Council the green light and today it represents stakeholders from 17 commodity associations, including beef, diary, pig, goat, root crop, fruit, ginger, kava, coconut and food processors.

The Council raises important issues with Government on behalf of its members and helps us identify where assistance is needed.

The Government and the FCLC have already worked closely on a number of issues. For example the recent assistance to the local pork industry by introducing protection from foreign predatory pricing and dumping.

My Government has also, because of our vision, zero rated duty on farm machinery, relevant implements and products. We have recently introduced a $1-millon fertilizer subsidy for non-sugar cane farmers.

At the moment, the FCLC is working on a very important project: educating farmers about how to apply for loans. Lending by private banks has grown exponentially in recent times, contributing to a very healthy growth of our nation’s economy. Farmers must take advantage of the increased lending and economic growth. As I mentioned earlier, running a farm is a business and farmers need to be equipped with the appropriate know-how in order to support and grow their operations.

In this respect later today I will be passing out certificates to twelve Financial Management Counselors.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

You’ll often hear me talk about “big picture” thinking. It’s the notion that as a Government we should never think of any one policy in isolation; instead, we need to understand how it fits into the bigger picture of what we’re trying to accomplish in the long-term.

I’m proud to say that my Government has introduced big picture thinking to Fiji’s Agriculture sector. We’ve taken a holistic approach so that our policies work together to encourage and assist Fijian farmers.

Government’s agricultural scholarships, launched in 2013, are a perfect example of this.

They address one of the biggest problems facing the Industry: that not enough of our young people are choosing to become farmers.

We need to encourage students to think seriously about farming as a profession and show them that it can offer solid career prospects.

Each year, after a rigorous selection process, successful scholarship recipients attend a 12-month certificate course at the Fiji National University Agricultural School that will train them in the various agricultural disciplines.

Under this program, these agricultural graduates will emerge from their studies with a career path and significant Government assistance to enable them to achieve their ambitions.

This is an important part of modernising the Industry and boosting the quality of our farmers.

I’m pleased to see the FCLC supporting these efforts by embracing the power of new technology.

The Council will soon be launching mobile phone applications – farmers will be able to use their mobile phone to access critical information, such as weather advisories and current market prices.

Of course access to this type of technology has been made possible by my Government’s liberalisation of the Telecommunications Industry and zero rating duty on smart phones – a holistic approach means benefits cut across the different sectors of the economy.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

As part of our focus on agriculture and farming, I would like to take this opportunity to announce a major revamp of the Sugar Cane Industry which we have been working on for a while.

Of course it must be remembered that it is only through the diversion of the EU sugar cane funds to other sectors that organizations such as FCLC have benefitted immensely from this redirection.

Government has been working to finalise a Sugar Industry Decree that will revolutionise the sugar cane transport system in Fiji amongst a number of other much-needed reforms.

Any sugar cane farmer will tell you that the current transport system is too expensive, too slow and too unreliable. For some farmers, cane transport or cartage makes up 50 per cent of their total costs.

There are instances when farmers have been held ransom by those who demand more than the agreed price for cartage.

And there are also instances when farmers have suffered because transport does not show up on time.

Under the new Decree, all this will change. The Fiji Sugar Corporation will assume management of all harvesting and transport.

This will give FSC direct control, greatly improving reliability and efficiency.

Farmers will also see a big push to improve the rail network and improve access to it so that more of them can take advantage of rail’s lower cost: $6 a ton by rail versus $13 a ton by lorry.

This is something that farmers have been asking for a long time, and their requests have not fallen on deaf ears.

But, of course, lorries will always be a vital part of the I`ndustry because they can access places that rail cannot. That’s why the FSC is also looking into discounting fuel for lorry drivers by 8 to 10 cents a litre. This will spell big savings for farmers and is another important reform.

However, the reforms are not just for the transport of cane. The Sugar Decree will also allow for the election of 8 Councillors to the Sugar Cane Growers Council - One from each mill area district. These Councillors will be elected directly by farmers to represent them in the Council and work together with FSC, Government and other relevant stake-holders.

Our approach is that we all need to collaborate so that we all, especially the farmers can reap the fruits of their labour. Confrontation and politicizing the mechanics and processes in the Sugar Cane Industry or any other commodity in agriculture will benefit no one - except the political agitators.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Fiji is on the right track and so long as we keep the fundamental current policy direction and settings in place, I have no doubt that farming has a bright future in our country.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank the European Union for their contribution to the FCLC, which together with Government assistance shall finance the operations of the organisation for the next three years.

With those few words, it is now my pleasure to declare the FCLC’s new offices open.

Vinaka vakalevu. Thank you.

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