

# ‘Inadequate labour holding back Tobago agriculture’



Berrycove Ltd’s hydroponic greenhouse at Cove Eco-Industrial and Business Park in Tobago.

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Chief Secretary Farley Augustine said he is considering offering incentives to the private sector as the Tobago House of Assembly (THA) intends to ramp up large-scale production on the island.

However, one Tobago-based food producer said inadequate skilled labour remains a hindrance to the agriculture sector.

At a media briefing on Sunday, Augustine bemoaned an over-reliance on the MV Blue Wave Harmony cargo vessel and said Tobago needs to find a better way to feed itself.

“The objective is to achieve food security,” he said.

“We have to work on warehousing, we have to work on factories and what we produce, because it cannot be our permanent solution is to just have a boat that works all the time.”

Augustine said he was issuing a challenge to the private sector to invest in

these areas.

“It is something that we absolutely have to look at and what we looking at is how the THA can provide incentives and getting the private sector to do the warehousing and what is necessary so we can mass produce some of the goods on the islands instead of bringing everything through the Port of Port-of-Spain.”

Augustine said upgrading the Port of Scarborough is crucial to achieving food sovereignty.

“We can’t rely on having all of our goods sail past us in Tobago, sail into Port-of-Spain and then fight up to bring it from Port-of-Spain back to Tobago.

The goods we are importing from international partners, we should bring it right here in Tobago.”

He said the challenge is to secure funding for the project and that he hopes to make strides during this term in office.

Augustine said his entire executive council met with the Tobago Chamber of Industry and Commerce on Saturday and challenges were discussed as well as plans for the future.

The chamber described the meeting as fruitful and urged members to stay ready to capitalise on any opportunities available.

Guardian Media spoke to Kevin Mac Lean, general manager of Berrycove Ltd, a company operating on the Cove Industrial Estate for the past three years.

Berrycove shot into the spotlight a few years ago as it announced its intention to grow raspberries and strawberries at its hydroponic farm.

Mac Lean said the company also produces Romaine lettuce, Arugula Chef’s mix, basil, parsley, mint and other herbs for hotels and restaurants in Tobago and Trinidad.

He said disruptions to the cargo boat in the past have affected their operations, but said a main issue for agriculture is a shortage of skilled labour.

He appealed for “some form of government assistance on the labour side of things, (which) would be beneficial for pushing farms in Tobago... We have some youth programmes and we get internships and so on, but that’s not a consistent form of labour.

“So to me, having good incentives when it comes to hiring people, incentives when it comes to rental of land or purchase of land at reduced rates, things like that will push agriculture in Tobago. You know, we have limited flat land in Tobago, so at the end of the day, there’s only so much you can do and different places where you could grow.”

Guardian Media spoke to Goldsborough farmer Roland Murray recently who said even unskilled labour is hard to find.

Mac Lean agreed with Murray, saying many of his employees have a morning job with the THA and fulfil those duties before reporting for work.

He said the operating cost of doing business in Tobago is higher than Trinidad as “everything in Tobago is typically about 20 to 30 per cent more.

So plumbing parts, all these kind of things, you know, hardware supplies, cleaning products, anything like that, sanitising products, we need to bring in from Trinidad still.”

He believes if agriculture is booming in Tobago, the downstream industries will develop as well.

“It will lead more to more agro shops and more availability of packaging and all these kind of things that you need to have available to increase your output and food production here. We do have some production facilities available here in Tobago that are run by Government as well.”

He said these should be utilised more and made more accessible to smaller farmers.

“So cooperatives are important, especially when it comes to smaller farmers, making sure that they can pool their resources and pool their product to develop new markets.”