LAUNCHING OF THE TRAINING FOR TRAINERS PROGRAMME

ON “BIO-FARMING: MAURIGAP LEVEL 1 STANDARD AND AGRICULTURAL CERTIFICATION

SOFITEL IMPERIAL, FLIC-EN-FLAC

WEDNESDAY 20 APRIL 2016 AT 09H30

I am pleased to be present among you this morning for the opening of the training of trainers on: “Bio-Farming: MauriGap level 1 Standard and Agricultural Certification” which is being organised by my Ministry.

This training programme has been mounted by the International Consultancy Firm Biocert PVT India, which has wide experience in sustainable agricultural certification.

I must say that this training of trainers programme has come at a most opportune time as it is only last Friday that I presented a Paper to Government for the introduction of the Bio-Farming Promotion Scheme by my Ministry.

As you are well aware, the production of bio-foods according to bio-norms is high on the Agenda of the Government.

We have the ambition of producing no less than 50% of our total local food production according to bio-norms by 2020

This is indeed an ambitious project in which I will invest myself fully.
We cannot dispute the fact that during the last ten years there has been an alarming increase in the number of people affected by cancer.

Though up to now, it has not been proven that there is a direct relationship between abusive utilisation of pesticides in food crop production and cancer, yet there is a strong perception in the public that this might be one of the causes of the disease.

In fact some of you might recall that recently during a recent workshop organised by the Mauritius Chamber of Agriculture on SMART Agriculture to disseminate the findings of a study carried out on some 300 planters, the participants were shocked to learn the manner in which pesticides were being applied in fruit and vegetable cultivation.

During the survey, some planters had admitted using pesticides as medicines to control pests and diseases in plants.

In some cases the dosage used was being increased tremendously without any expert advice.

Some planters were even using without authorisation a cocktail of pesticides on their food crops as a preventive measure.

In view of all these malpractices, my Ministry cannot afford to allow things to continue as before. I have already set up a Technical Committee at the level of my Ministry comprising relevant stakeholders in the Agricultural Sector to
prepare Regulations under the Dangerous Chemical Control Act 2004 to control the proper and safe use of pesticides by farmers and on pesticides residues on vegetables, fruits and other agricultural materials.

These regulations are expected to be finalised by the end of this year.

Once these Regulations are in force, my Ministry will be empowered to take actions against all those who do not comply with the prescription regarding the dosage of pesticides to be used on food crops.

My Ministry has also since 2009 been systematically collecting samples of fresh fruits and vegetables at farm gate level for analysis of pesticides residues.

An average of 400 samples are being collected and tested annually.

Of these, an average of 4.2% has been found to be above the Maximum Residue Level as set out by the FAO Codex Alimentarius.

Those farmers whose samples are found above the MRL are, continuously monitored by FAREI to ensure that they do not make abusive utilisation of pesticides

I am, however, conscious that we need to ensure that the fruits and vegetables that we are consuming do not have pesticides residue above the Maximum Residue Level.
In view of the limited capacity of the Food Technology Laboratory both in terms of equipment and personnel, we are envisaging the possibility of having recourse to private laboratories to leverage capacity for analysis of pesticides residues.

In this way we will be able to analyse more samples and ensure that test results are available in a timely manner for effective remedial actions, whenever necessary.

In addition to the setting up of the necessary legal and Regulatory framework to control the proper use of pesticides on food crop production, we also need to encourage farmers to shift from conventional agricultural practices which are presently based on heavy utilisation of chemical inputs to bio-farming/organic farming with less or no utilisation of chemical inputs. This is however a lengthy process which cannot be achieved overnight.

To kick start this process, my Ministry has, in collaboration with the Mauritius Standards Bureau developed the MauriGap level 1 standard which is the basic standard for the production of crops under bio farming systems.

This standard has already been gazetted and has now been incorporated in a farm diary which I am informed will be used today during the training programme. A copy of this farm diary has been given to you.
All farmers engaged in bio-farming activities will henceforth have to take the commitment to follow this standard within a period of one year if they want their products to be certified and also if they want to take advantage of fiscal and financial incentives under the Bio-Farming Promotion Scheme.

I would like here to inform all those present that farmers engaged in bio-farming activities will be eligible to:

(1) Income tax holiday for the first eight years of operation

(2) Value Added Tax Exemption on production equipment and other input acquired for the implementation of the project;

(3) Loan facilities at an annual interest rate of 3.4% over a period of ten years for a maximum of 90% project financing under the MauBank SME financing Scheme and Fast track business support solutions from the FAREI and MyBiz.

As per eligibility criteria laid down by my Ministry to have access to these incentives, applicants will have to take the commitment to implement the requirements of MauriGAP Level 1 and to be certified within a period not exceeding one year from the starting date of the project.

Moreover, the applicants will also have to take the commitment to comply with the requirements of the MauriGap Level 2 and MauriGap level 3 standards or other internationally recognized organic standards within a maximum period of 7 years after the starting date of the project.
Regarding these standards, I am informed that the Mauritius Standards Bureau is currently working on these.

Today this training on the MauriGAP level 1 and Agricultural Certification is meant for the staff of my Ministry, FAREI and the Small Farmers Welfare Fund who will be closely monitoring farmers engaged in bio-farming activities.

It has been scheduled over three days starting as from today and on the last day the training will be on the field.

Thereafter, the training programme will be extended to all those engaged in bio-farming activities and will be organised islandwide.

We are not stopping at the training of our staff and farmers.

As you are aware, there is no Certification Authority in Mauritius for the certification of bio-foods.

We are encouraging people to produce food according to bio norms and standards. However, we need to have a Certification body to valorize these products.

My Ministry has also addressed this issue and I am glad here to announce that my Ministry is in the process of setting up a Certification Body: the “Mauritius Agricultural Certification Body” which will operate under the aegis of my Ministry to certify all agricultural products that comply, in the first instance with the MauriGAP Level 1 standard.

The certification will gradually be extended to the level 2 and 3 once these are finalized.
I would also like to seize this opportunity to inform you all that my Ministry has also obtained technical assistance from the FAO to implement the project “Support for the Development of Organic Farming and Intuitional Capacity Building in Mauritius”.

As per this project, the FAO will prepare a National Strategic Plan for the adoption and promotion of organic agriculture including a strategy on marketing of organic products and prepare a National Legislation on Organic Agriculture among others.

A team of experts from FAO will be in Mauritius as from next week to implement this project.

I strongly believe that once farmers adopt the MauriGap level 1 standard, it will be easier for them to shift to organic agriculture which is the production of fruits and vegetables without any utilization of chemical inputs.

Government is not sparing any efforts to ensure that the vegetables and fruits that we are consuming do not have pesticides residues, and I am sure that in some 3 years we should be able to achieve the target of drastically reducing the utilization of chemical inputs in food crop production.

I will personally ensure that bio farming remains a priority of my Ministry.

If people have healthy and safe food to eat, we will have a healthy population and we need a healthy population to build the Mauritius of tomorrow.
With these few words, I now declare open this training of trainer programme on “Bio Farming: MauriGAP level 1 standard and Agricultural Certification”. I wish you a fruitful session during these three days.