

B/919 The Honourable Third Member for Belle Rose and Quatre Bornes **(Ms Deerpalsing)**

*To ask Dr the Honourable Minister of Agro Industry and Fisheries:-*

**Whether he will state if a national food policy will be formulated in view of the fact that basic staple food prices worldwide are projected to be subject to sustained increases over the long term?**

Mr Speaker Sir,

In my reply to PQ B/838, I circulated a detailed statement informing of my intention to come up with a plan for Strategic Options in Crop Diversification and Livestock Sector 2007-2015 and prior to that, to organise a workshop by the end August. A High Powered Committee would be convened thereafter.

2. Our basic staple foods are rice and flour, milk and milk products, cooking oil and fats, meat and eggs, fruits and vegetables.

3. The purpose of any national food policy is to ensure food security. Food security in Mauritius is provided through local production, and for those designated items that cannot be produced economically, through imports by the State Trading Corporation (STC), the Agricultural Marketing Board (AMB) and the private sector.

4. Mauritius is a Net Food Importing Developing Country, and although we do not have any written document on food policy as such, we do have a policy of ensuring that the food needs of the whole country are met.

5. Food policy in Mauritius has evolved over time. Various incentives have been provided to diversify our agricultural base, increase storage facilities and encourage new technologies to increase food production. We have achieved self-sufficiency in fresh vegetables, chicken and eggs and 55% self sufficiency in pork and 54% in potatoes.

6. The considerable demand for "bio-fuels" worldwide is shifting huge amounts of land out of food production. One-sixth of all the grain grown in the United States this year will be "industrial corn" destined to be converted into ethanol and burned in cars. US farmland devoted to bio-fuels grew by 48 percent in 2006, at the expense of land for food production.

7. Europe, Brazil and China are all heading in the same direction switching from food to fuel. The food market and the energy market are becoming closely linked, which is very bad news for NFIDCs.

8. Against this background, we are reviewing our strategy to ensure that the whole nation is aware of these realities over which we have no control, and together, as a nation we put the necessary collective effort to produce as much as we can, on every unit of land area, as well as engage intensively in soil less culture, e.g, the Village Hydroponique at Cluny.

9. We need an information system to provide a clear indication of trends within the agricultural sector, to assist in the periodic review of plans and policies in the overall decision making process.

10. Mauritius, as a COMESA Member State, is participating in the Agricultural Marketing Promotion and Regional Integration Project (AMPRIP) within the region, to help build capacity to enable us to make reliable Food Projections. This will ensure that a regional market is available, should traditional markets like Asia and Australia face shortages. In this context, I have recently launched a COMESA funded project on the 'Food and Agricultural Market Information System (FAMIS)', which is designed to address this issue.

11. We also know that agricultural production can be subject to gluts and shortages, due to climatic factors, pests and diseases, post harvest handling, storage failures and processing limitations.

12. We now have the technology that protects from some of these factors, e.g. production of meat in industrial feedlots, fruit and vegetables under plastic tunnels and in hydroponic farms.

13. Because of increasing costs of production, and increasing awareness of the need to protect the environment, consumers are also favouring bio-products. We are encouraging SMEs to embark in naturally preserved foods, solar dried and vacuum packed.

14. The approach is now to adopt policies and measures which ensure improvement in quality, quantity and variety of local agricultural production, to contribute towards a higher degree of food security, satisfy domestic and export niche markets in the context of a sustainable development agenda.

15. The country is generally self-sufficient in fresh vegetables except in times of unfavourable climatic conditions. The most important food crops in terms of area under cultivation and volume of supply are potato, onion, tomato, carrot and cabbage. In general Mauritius is self sufficient up to 54% for potato, 30% for onion, 100% for cabbage and 100% for carrots. We now produce up to 115,000 tons of fruits and vegetables annually. The market is currently oversupplied leading to very low prices.

16. The dairy sector in Mauritius has largely been characterised by traditional backyard producers who have been operating on a low input - low output system of production, which action is not sustainable in a rapidly developing economy. Between 2000 and 2006, the number of cattle head has declined from 9 600 heads to 5, 800, and the number of farmers from 2, 500 to 1,700. Local milk production has decreased from 5M to 3.5M litres, representing only 2.2 % of the total consumption. Imports of milk and milk products account for some Rs 2 Billion.

17. Climatic changes are causing crop failures in countries like India, New Zealand and Australia, which are limiting their exports of cereals and dairy products. It may be recalled that for a number of years, Mauritius benefitted from surplus in milk and milk products that occurred in Europe with its Common Agricultural Policy. The cheaper prices of imported milk indirectly contributed to disinterest by local milk producers who found difficulty in disposing of their milk. With the recent decline in production in our traditional source of supply, reviving the local dairy industry has become a top priority. A special committee has been set up under the chairpersonship of the FARC to propose a time bound action plan to address all aspects, including import of breeding stock.

18. The first cluster of a 'Village Laitier' is shaping up at Nouvelle Decouverte, where a second dairy cooperative is being accommodated. We have received expressions of interest from various entrepreneurs for dairy farming in Salazie and the requests are being examined. We have also given favourable consideration from Food and Allied Industries Ltd for lease of land at Richelieu for fodder production for its integrated farm being set up in St Pierre.

19. As regards the poultry and eggs sector, Mauritius is self sufficient in chicken production. As price of raw materials for animal feed continue to increase, price of the final goods could also increase. All the maize required to support the poultry industry is imported. Cross border

initiatives with Madagascar and Mozambique are being encouraged, and prospective entrepreneurs have been invited to invest in these countries for the Mauritius market.

20. We are also actively encouraging SMEs to diversify within the poultry sector by setting up duck farms. They are getting special support and training from AREU, assistance from the Empowerment Programme, and ducklings from our Albion Farm.

21. In the fisheries sector, we are making every effort to increase supply on the local market. Consumption is currently around 20Kg per head. According to FAO reports, capture fisheries production has reached its maximum and the bulk of additional fish production will come from aquaculture. Discussions on an appropriate legal framework for the development of aquaculture and aquatic businesses are on going.

22. Agricultural pests and diseases are major threats to agricultural production worldwide and thus can adversely affect our food strategy. Adoption of sanitary and phytosanitary norms thus form an essential part of the food production chain. Protecting the country's plant and animal resources from external and internal phytosanitary threats is a national priority to safeguard food production and to maintain the disease-free status of our country.

23. I have outlined in a broad manner the way we are going to address issues related to food production. A food policy needs to encompass more than just increase in food production, and our workshop should allow all stakeholders to brainstorm and make recommendations that can contribute in the formulation of a national policy document.