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EUGENE PETTY

(Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Agriculture, St. Kitts and Nevis)

General Perspectives on Caribbean Agricultural Diversification

OPENING REMARKS

It is indeed a great privilege for me to welcome you to the opening of the 19th West Indies Agricultural Economics Conference, jointly sponsored by the Caribbean Agro-Economic Society and the Government of St. Kitts and Nevis. I wish to extend a special and hearty welcome to our overseas participants. In welcoming you to our country, I would like at the same time, to encourage you to take advantage of the kind and generous hospitality for which our people have become renowned.

This Conference takes place at a time when St. Kitts and Nevis is embarking upon a comprehensive and challenging programme of agricultural diversification. It is therefore extremely gratifying that St. Kitts and Nevis was chosen to host this Conference. The choice of our country for this important Conference reflects the seriousness with which our efforts are viewed, as we seek to transform the nation's economy from the dominant monoculture to a diversified, stable economy.

The programme of agricultural diversification is expected to reduce our dependence on the sugar industry and simultaneously stimulate growth in the economy. It involves tree crop, livestock and arable crop production, plus the necessary support services of credit, extension, marketing, cultivation services and training. The programme also places emphasis on fisheries development and institutional strengthening.

The benefits of this comprehensive programme will be far-reaching. St. Kitts and Nevis is expected to reap great benefits in terms of foreign exchange savings and earnings, employment creation and the strengthening of food security. Benefits should also flow in terms of greater use of under-utilised resources and, of course, stronger linkages between agriculture and other sectors of the

economy, especially tourism and manufacturing.

The benefits of agricultural diversification have long been the subject of discussion throughout the Caribbean. Since the late 1960s and early 1970s, when Caribbean Government leaders became very concerned about the deterioration of the regional agricultural sector, the call for diversification has been echoing. This serious concern over stagnant or marginal increases in domestic food production and a downward trend in agricultural exports led Caribbean Governments to adopt a Regional Food Plan, later to become the Regional Food and Nutrition Strategy.

Although there has been recognition over the past two decades of the need to diversify the agricultural sector, it is my view that a genuine commitment to build a vibrant agricultural sector has only been witnessed within the last 5 years. Within this period, we have seen regional Governments move away from rhetoric to actual implementation of diversification programmes.

I believe that evidence of a genuine effort by our Governments to restructure the agricultural sector has, to some extent, encouraged our Caribbean academics and practitioners, alike, to give greater attention to analysis of the implications of agricultural diversification. Just last year May, in Grenada, "Agricultural Diversification in the Caribbean Community" was the theme of the statement delivered by Mr. William Demas, former President of the Caribbean Development Bank, to the Seventeenth Annual Meeting of the Board of Directors.

Last year, also, the Caribbean Food Crops Society and the Caribbean Agro-Economic Society concentrated on the theme of "Crop Diversification" at a joint meeting held in Antigua.

This year, the Caribbean Agro-Economic Society intends to advance the discussion and analysis of agricultural diversification, with emphasis on implementing policies and strategies for diversifying the agricultural sector.

The theme of this Conference, "Implementing Agricultural Diversification: Policies and Strategies," is rather fitting at a time when Caribbean countries, including St. Kitts and Nevis, are facing the challenge, head on, of building a strong agricultural sector. This is no easy task, bearing in mind our limited resources.

This Conference therefore provides a unique opportunity, with the gathering here of some of our most outstanding agricultural experts and economists in the Region, to fully and seriously address the implications of implementing programmes of agricultural

diversification. I sincerely believe that you will, through the exchange of ideas, put forward recommendations of practical strategies for tackling the challenging task of diversification with energy, commitment and hope.

I thus have great confidence that this Conference will be a memorable and successful event, in guiding the future of agricultural development in the Region.

It is hoped that you would make it even more memorable by using this opportunity to build friendships, renew acquaintances and, of course, become involved in the social activities we have planned for you. I can assure you that if you so partake of the warmth of our hospitality, at the end of this Conference you will be thankful for being lured so close to paradise, if not paradise itself. And, believe me, this is no idle boast.

Thank you very much.