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PRESS RELEASE

The Ministry of Agriculture officially releases contract for The Agricultural Technology Cooperation Project

The Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Barbuda Affairs, Hon. Dean Jonas has announced that the official document outlining the Agreement for the Chinese funded Antigua and Barbuda Agricultural Technology Cooperation Project has been finalized.

The Minister made the disclosure today (Thursday) amidst concerns being raised in recent weeks by some farmers and political figures about the draft agreement which was leaked to the public a few weeks ago.

At a meeting Minister Jonas held last month with the National Coalition of Farmers, he assured the group that the project, the details of which had not yet been finalized, held great prospects for the local farming community.

Despite repeated efforts by Minister Jonas, his senior technicians and the country's head of government, Prime Minister Gaston Browne to continuously promote the positives of the project to the farming community and by extension, the entire nation of Antigua and Barbuda, there were still segments of the population who expressed concerns and a keenness to receive more details.

Stating that he was pleased to share the document with the public, Minister Jonas added that he is confident that with the release of the official contract the concerns will finally be put to rest.

The Government of the People's Republic of China has identified the Chinese-based Yuan Longping High-Tech Agriculture Company (LPHT) as the entity which will be providing technical and other assistance valued at between eight to ten million Eastern Caribbean to the people of Antigua and Barbuda. Contrary to claims that the Government is giving lands to any Chinese entity, Minister Jonas highlighted the fact that the donation will greatly enhance the overall productivity within the local farming sector.

Minister Jonas made it clear that, "It was never, and is not the intention of the Government of Antigua and Barbuda, under this project, to disenfranchise any farmer nor to assign any crown lands to any country, including China".

Minister Jonas also used the opportunity to directly address some of the other questions and concerns which had been raised regarding the Agricultural project such as the potential for an unmanageable glut of food production and the employment of Chinese workers to perform tasks on the experimental farms.

The Agriculture Minister revealed that the project will address the sale, conversion and appropriate use of the produce realized from the assigned lands as well as from private farms, in an effort to reduce the food import bill of an estimated half of a billion Eastern Caribbean dollars.

The Agriculture Minister noted that the project will hire legal residents of Antigua and Barbuda to perform the required tasks on the experimental farms under the supervision of the Agricultural Development Corporation (ADC) with guidance from nine (9) Chinese technical experts.

Local farmers will be provided with training, advice and the opportunity to gain firsthand experience on the experimental farm, so that they could duplicate the practices on their own farms.

Local farmers will also benefit from reduced waste of produce through improved post harvest production and tissue culture products among others.

In terms of the amount of land being identified for inclusion in this project, the Agriculture Minister said that while it is intended that 4,000 acres of land will be desired outcome, this will take place in a phased manner, with the initial portion of 1000 acres being gradually increased to the desired amount over the three-year life of the project. Presently in Antigua and Barbuda, approximately 1000 acres of land are under agricultural production with an estimated 100 acres being farmed under public sector initiatives and the rest under private sector production. Minister Jonas confirmed that this initial 1000 acres is anticipated to be expanded in short order to obtain the largest benefits from the technical expertise.

Project Coordination will be the responsibility of The Agricultural Development Corporation.

Minister Jonas lauded the continued positive bilateral relationship which exists between Antigua and Barbuda and the People's Republic of China. He recounted that over the past 35 years, the PRC has made major contributions to national development in the sports, culture, infrastructure, education, tourism and the health sectors. Most recently, in a show of their continued commitment to national development, a Memorandum of Understanding on cooperation within the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative was signed this week between Antigua and Barbuda and The People's Republic of China. This was described as historic occurrence since Antigua and Barbuda is the first country in the OECS to benefit from such an initiative.

Minister Jonas stated that the public can be assured that the Ministry of Agriculture remains committed to its mandate to take the necessary steps to ensure that the nation's food security is placed on a firm footing.

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This press release was prepared by the Communications Department in the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Barbuda Affairs

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