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PRESS RELEASE

Closing Seminar for the Advisory Services on With/Post COVID-19 Agricultural Value Chain Improvement in Belize

Belmopan, December 11, 2024.

The Ministry of Agriculture, Food Security, and Enterprise (MAFSE), in collaboration with the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), successfully hosted the closing seminar for the “*Advisory Services on With/Post COVID-19 Agricultural Value Chain Improvement in Belize*” project on Wednesday, December 11, at the Dream Valley Resort.

This seminar marked the culmination of a groundbreaking initiative designed to enhance agricultural value chains and foster rural economic transformation amid the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic. Since February 2023, MAFSE and JICA have worked closely to identify and support value chains for three key crops: coconut, pitahaya, and potato. Farmers from all six districts of Belize have benefitted from extensive training programs, leading to tangible outcomes such as:

- The distribution of over 2,000 coconut seedlings and pitahaya cuttings to participating farmers.
- The establishment of three potato demonstration plots, where farmers received training on good agricultural practices and post-harvest management.
- The development of action plans by coconut farmers in the Toledo District, enabling them to sell coconut water collectively.
- The promotion of dragon fruit (pitahaya) value addition through collaboration with the University of Belize (UB), Belize Marketing and Development Corporation (BMDC), and the Belize Tourism Board (BTB). BMDC worked with small farmers to enhance value addition, while BTB facilitated connections with hoteliers in San Pedro and other key tourism destinations.

Additionally, small equipment, such as rototillers, freezers, and vacuum sealers, were procured to support activities linked to the value chains. To further strengthen the market-oriented capacity of farmers, the Smallholder Horticulture Empowerment and Promotion (SHEP) approach was integrated into the project. This methodology shifts the mindset of farmers from “grow and sell” to “grow to sell,” equipping them with the tools to better align their production with market demands.

MAFSE extension officers from all six districts have been trained in the SHEP approach and are actively implementing it. Earlier this year, Ms. Catherine Hob, a MAFSE technical officer, participated in training in Japan and Bolivia, gaining valuable insights into SHEP. She has since been instrumental in sharing her experiences with other extension and cooperative officers.

In early 2025, with JICA’s continued support, three additional technical officers will attend a global SHEP conference in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, to share Belize’s experiences and further enhance their expertise. This project has exemplified strong collaboration among key stakeholders, including the University of Belize, BMDC, and BTB, to drive agricultural innovation and value chain development. While challenges brought by natural events impacted some aspects of the project, the technical presentations during the seminar addressed these issues, demonstrating resilience and adaptability.

MAFSE thanks JICA, particularly Mr. Machida, for unwavering support throughout this initiative. Special thanks are also extended to the farmers, extension officers, and technical staff, whose dedication and commitment have been critical to the project’s success. As the Ministry looks forward to continuing its partnership with JICA, it remains committed to finding innovative ways to promote activities and programs that empower rural communities and provide economic opportunities through sustainable agricultural practices.

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For more information, contact:

Dr. Victoriano Pascual

822-2241