



Rear Admiral (Rt'd) Hon. Josaia Voreqe Bainimarama, CF(Mil), OSt.J, MSD, jssc, psc

Hon. Prime Minister and Minister for iTaukei Affairs, Sugar Industry and Foreign Affairs

HANDOVER OF FSC TRACTORS AND FARM IMPLEMENTS

Girmit Centre
LAUTOKA

Thurs., 29 March, 2018
1000 Hours

High Commissioner of India, Your Excellency Vishvas Sapkal;

FSC Board and Management;

Our Cane Farmers;

Industry Stakeholders;

Ladies and Gentlemen.

Bula vinaka and a very good morning to you all.

I'm delighted to be here this morning with our cane farmers from here in Lautoka and the surrounding areas as we take another big step forward, together, into the future of cane farming in Fiji. Today, we are officially handing over 30 new tractors with implements to the Fiji Sugar Corporation that will serve our hard-working farmers in cane fields all across the country.

As your Prime Minister, over the years I've met with cane farmers everywhere in Fiji, including with many of you who are here today. I deeply appreciate the time I've spent on cane farms and in talanoa sessions with you, our farmers; Fijians who I've always known are among the hardest working people in Fiji, and surely, anywhere in the world.

I've said time and time again, our Sugar Cane Industry will always remain at the heart of the Fijian economy. And that commitment is as strong now as ever before.

The sweat and effort of cane farmers has built Fiji as we know it today, and so it will build the Fiji of tomorrow as well. Our economy is on track to grow for nine years in a row, that has never happened since our Independence, and unemployment in Fiji stands at the lowest point in 20 years. And as members of Team Fiji, all of our farmers have played a critical part in our success. So thank you for the work you do.

My Government is working hard as well, fighting for our farmers and for this Industry at home and abroad, just as all of you are working hard every single day to build this Industry and put food on the table for your families.

You've always been straight with me about the problems you face as cane farmers, and I've always been straight with you – since the very start of my Government's campaign to revitalise our Sugar Cane Industry – about our vision for taking this Industry forward.

We've been clear and consistent the whole way through, and we are seeing – every day – the benefits of your tireless work and my Government's game plan for putting Fijian sugar in markets all around the world. And as the years have gone by, in our meetings, I've seen our commitment to this Industry and our good work translate directly into greater confidence and security for our cane farmers. So much so, that cane farming is now becoming a very attractive new industry for the Fijian people, as they've seen the tremendous turnaround this Industry has experienced, as well as the incentives my Government is offering new farmers.

My fellow Fijians,

Our strategy for this Industry has never been about Band-Aid solutions and quick fixes. Our strategy for this Industry has never been about politicising it. In fact our strategy has been to de-politicise it.

Because it has always been about guaranteeing a sustainable and resilient future for the Sugar Cane Industry and the farmers. It has always been about real, strategic policy making that is reducing your costs and addressing the hardships you face as cane farmers so that we can make Fijian sugar as competitive as it can be on the global stage.

One way we're doing that is by rapidly modernising and mechanising this Industry. The beauty of mechanisation is that it not only reduces the intense man hours necessary to deliver a successful season, it also protects you from labour shortages and, ultimately, when we embrace mechanisation, we reduce costs, raise efficiency and cement Fijian sugar's place in the global marketplace. Only with that game plan can we keep this Industry thriving into the 21st century, continue this Industry's vital role in growing the Fijian economy and continue to support the over **200,000** Fijians who rely on the strength of the Fijian Sugar industry.

We've heard many times before, and I'm sure we will hear more of it in the months ahead, the lies, bold claims and big promises from the Opposition. They say they'll give 100 dollars per tonne, but they don't have any real strategy for bringing down your costs to secure long-term viability for this Industry. That is because they don't have a long-term vision. They are short-sighted. They are only ever focussed on the next day's headlines, while my Government is focussed on the big picture. I am focussed on your future – a sustainable, resilient and profitable future for Fijian sugar.

My Government actually walks the talk. We are about action and we are about results. We are about bringing certainty and prosperity to our farmers today by putting tools and technology in the hands of our farmers, and securing a sustainable and resilient future for the next generation of cane farmers in Fiji. And we have put money where it matters when it comes to supporting this Industry.

In total, the budget toward the Sugar Industry was increased to **60 million Dollars** this financial year, nearly double last year's allocation. And with our support, cane production in 2018 is anticipated to reach close to two million tonnes.

I've gone into detail over the specific programmes and record funding that my Government has allocated towards this Industry many times before. We are boosting cane production and improving extension services, transportation and harvesting. We've helped transfer new and better technologies to farmers. We've set aside nearly **16 Million Dollars** for the Cane Replanting Programme, and that major funding increase has led to 5,671 hectares planted in 2017 compared to 3,900 last year.

My Government introduced the fertiliser subsidy in 2009, and in the last budget we've made that subsidy even more generous, lowering the price paid by our farmers to only 20 dollars per bag, and we've seen a fertiliser sale increase of nearly 40 per cent since January last year. So I encourage all of you to keep taking advantage of this great subsidy.

I know many of you face ongoing issues with labour shortages. As I've explained, that is why we've made such a big push towards mechanised farming. Aside from this handover, we've assisted 21 Co-operatives with **90,000 Dollars** each for deposit payments on mechanical harvesters. Already, we've increased the total percentage of cane harvested by mechanical harvesters from eight per cent last year to 18 per cent. We've coupled this programme with a new programme to recruit foreign cane cutters in regions that are facing the worst labour shortages, to give another layer of relief to our growers.

We are working with our development partners as well to support cane farming in Fiji, most recently with the Indian Government, where we are exploring a massive upgrade of our rail systems, which of course, will have a big impact for cane farmers around the country.

My Government also introduced a new, 6.3 million dollar Weedicide Subsidy program this financial year aimed at helping our cane farmers maximise the yield of their harvest through assistance in paying for the herbicides that are necessary to protect your crops. Now, our farmers are paying only 45 per cent of the total price.

Through our Sugarcane Rehabilitation and Small Grant Scheme, my Government has set aside **One Million Dollars** for supplies like fencing materials, pumps, and water tanks, all of which will allow our smaller sugar farms to keep pace in a rapidly-changing industry.

My Government has also continued to pay the Sugar Levy on behalf of the farmers to the Sugar Cane Growers Council, taking the burden off farmers by covering all of the Council's administrative costs. The Sugar Cane Growers Council is not about holding elections for different political parties. The Sugar Cane Growers Council's sole purpose is to look after the welfare of the farmers.

Ladies and Gentlemen – as we promised – we covered the entire cost for all cane that was transferred from the Penang Mill area to the Rarawai Mill. So, no farmer was unable to supply their cane -- despite the blatantly false claims from the Opposition.

Our wide-reaching assistance is seriously lowering your cost base, and just this week we saw the fruits of our labour come to pass, as our cane farmers welcomed the 13 dollar and 45 cent per tonne third cane payment, a massive step up from the 9 dollar and 28 cent payment this time last year.

Today's launch of the FSC Tractor and Implements Fleet is a part of our extensive effort to mechanise cane farming, make life easier and better for our farmers and bring world-class tools to bear in our sugar cane industry.

These 30 Mahindra 9500 92 horsepower four-wheel drive tractors represent an investment of 2.8 million dollars from my Government, and this investment is a key pillar of the FSC's five-year plan to mechanise this industry, make life better and easier for our farmers, and make our sugar industry more competitive.

These tractors will be hired out to farmers at minimum costs and will come with employed drivers trained to handle this equipment. So as a farmer, all you need to do is focus on your business, the business of farming cane, and let these tractors and drivers assist with land preparation and cane planting, and watch your production costs fall dramatically.

As far as the timing of this handover, it couldn't be better, as we are on the cusp of the replanting season. So you will soon all be able to join the many millions of farmers around the world who rely on these best in class tractors to get the job done in time for the next season.

This handover, I'm very excited to say is only the beginning, as the FSC has planned orders for more mechanical harvesters, haulage trucks and new field vehicles to serve our cane farmers around the country.

Ladies and Gentlemen, we are taking this industry into a new era of modernisation and a new era of prosperity. We are giving you, our cane farmers, the tools and the resources you need to be the most productive you can be, even in the face of our changing climate, a changing industry and a changing global marketplace.

Whatever challenges the future holds, know that we will confront those challenges together. Know that all of you will always have my ear. I will always listen to you and keep you updated on our agenda and our vision for this Industry. And you will always have my unwavering commitment. My commitment to you, your families and to all of Fiji. At home and abroad, I will continue to fight for you and for this Industry. And together, we will make this cane farming in Fiji more resilient, more sustainable and more profitable, now and in all the years to come.

Thank you. Vinaka vakalevu. And I wish all of you and your families and very Happy Easter.
