



TWENTY - THIRD REPORT OF THE

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS

C O M M I T T E E

FOURTH SESSION OF THE 11TH PARLIAMENT

Examination of the Audited Financial Statements of the National
Inquiry Agricultural Marketing and Development Corporation (NAMDEVCO) for
the financial years 2008 to 2011.



Public Accounts Committee¹

The Public Accounts Committee (PAC) established by the Constitution of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago in accordance with Section 119(4) is mandated to consider and report to the House of Representatives on:

“(a) appropriation accounts of moneys expended out of sums granted by Parliament to meet the public expenditure of Trinidad and Tobago;

(b) such other accounts as may be referred to the Committee by the House of Representatives or as are authorized or required to be considered by the committee under any other enactment; and

(c) the report of the Auditor General on any such accounts.”

Current membership

Dr. Bhoendradatt Tewarie	Chairman ²
Mr. Taharqa Obika	Vice- Chairman
Mrs. Ayanna Webster-Roy	Member
Mr. Randall Mitchell	Member
Mrs. Paula Gopee-Scoon	Member
Mr. Adrian Leonce	Member
Dr. Lester Henry	Member
Mrs. Charrise Seepersad	Member

Committee Staff

The current staff members serving the Committee are:

Ms. Keiba Jacob	Secretary to the Committee
Ms. Hema Bhagaloo	Assistant Secretary to the Committee
Ms. Vanna Jankiepersad	Procedural Officer Intern
Mr. Darien Buckmire	Graduate Research Assistant
Mr. Justin Jarrette	Graduate Research Assistant
Ms. Anesha James	Administrative Assistant

Publication

An electronic copy of this report can be found on the Parliament website:

http://www.ttparliament.org/committee_business.php?mid=19&id=230&pid=28

Contacts

All correspondence should be addressed to:

The Secretary

Public Accounts Committee

Office of the Parliament

Levels G-7, Tower D

The Port of Spain International Waterfront Centre

1A Wrightson Road Port of Spain Republic of Trinidad and Tobago

Tel: (868) 624-7275; Fax: (868) 625-4672

Email: pac@ttparliament.org

¹ The PAC of the Eleventh Republican Parliament was established by resolutions of the House of Representatives and the Senate at sittings held on Friday November 13, 2015 and Tuesday November 17, 2015 respectively.

² The Committee held its first meeting on Wednesday December 2, 2015. At this meeting the Committee elected Dr. Bhoendradatt Tewarie as Chairman, in accordance with Section 119(2) of the Constitution of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago. At that same meeting, the Committee resolved that its quorum should comprise of three (3) Members, inclusive of the Chairman and any other Opposition Member.

Table of Contents

Members of the Public Accounts Committee.....	4
Executive Summary.....	5
Introduction	8
Establishment.....	8
Mandate	8
Ministerial Response	8
Election of the Chairman and Vice Chairman	8
Establishment of Quorum	8
Determination of the Committee’s Work Programme	9
The Inquiry Process	10
National Agricultural Marketing and Development Corporation (NAMDEVCO) Profile	11
Background: National Agricultural Marketing and Development Corporation	11
Vision	11
Mission	11
Members of the Board of Directors	11
Senior Management.....	11
Line Ministry.....	12
Accounting Officer.....	12
Background: Auditor General	12
Issues and Recommendations	13
Concluding Remarks.....	22
Appendix I	25
Witnesses	25
APPENDIX II	26
Minutes of Meeting.....	26
Present were:.....	26
25. The compliance with US government regulations under the Food Safety Modernization Act to increase farmers’ access to the international markets.....	29

Members of the Public Accounts Committee

ELEVENTH PARLIAMENT,
REPUBLIC OF TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO



Dr. Bhoendradatt Tewarie
Chairman



Mr. Taharqa Obika
Vice- Chairman



Mrs. Ayanna Webster-Roy
Member



Mr. Randall Mitchell
Member



Mrs. Paula Gopee-Scoon
Member



Dr. Lester Henry
Member



Mr. Adrian Leonce
Member



Mrs. Charrise Seepersad
Member

Executive Summary

The Public Accounts Committee (PAC) is the Parliamentary Financial Oversight Committee tasked with the responsibility of examining the Report of the Auditor General and Audited Accounts of Statutory Authorities and Bodies. The Committee presents its Twenty – Third Report of the Eleventh Parliament which details its examination of ***the Audited Accounts, Balance Sheets and other Financial Statements of the National Agricultural Marketing and Development Corporation (NAMDEVCO) for the financial years 2008 to 2011*** and produced this report to highlight its findings and recommendations.

This report sets out the issues, endorsements and recommendations made by the Committee to improve NAMDEVCO's performance. The issues identified in this report were found during the period under examination (2008 to 2011).

During this inquiry, the following issues arose:

- The value contributed by NAMDEVCO to the economy;
- NAMDEVCO's market development capabilities;
- NAMDEVCO's accounts receivable function and debt recovery efforts;
- The discrepancies in accounting records;
- The human resource deficiencies of NAMDEVCO;
- Sanitary and phytosanitary³ issues;
- Linkages with the tourism sector;
- The role of ICT's in NAMDEVCO's initiatives;
- The potential to develop organic produce;
- NAMDEVCO's activities in Tobago.

Based on the Committee's examination the following recommendations were proposed:

- *NAMDEVCO should ensure that its decision making processes are backed by accurate information in order to boost its credibility and effectiveness.*
- *NAMDEVCO should provide an explanation of its current procedures for handling its marketing function in the absence of marketing-related officers by March 31, 2019;*
- *NAMDEVCO should provide a status update on a timetable for the completion of its Strategic Plan by March 31, 2019;*
- *NAMDEVCO must provide Parliament as a matter of urgency with details of the improvements to be made to its accounting policies and procedures as well as a*

³ Relating to the health of plants, especially with respect to the requirements of international trade

description of its in-house training to guide staff in the preparation of the financial statements by March 31, 2019;

- *NAMDEVCO should provide the Parliament with a copy of its standard debt recovery procedure by March 31, 2019;*
- *NAMDEVCO should write to Parliament setting out the status of its cleanup effort regarding its accounts receivable register and the rationale for any items removed from the said register, by March 31, 2019;*
- *NAMDEVCO should submit a progress report on efforts by the collection agency hired to pursue its bad debtors by March 31, 2019;*
- *NAMDEVCO should create conditions conducive to the strengthening of market-driven organic agriculture by creating national mandatory standards for identifying and labelling produce as organic to give consumers the opportunity to show the extent of their interest in organic produce. This should be done by July 31, 2019;*
- *NAMDEVCO should help to promote service-driven organic agriculture by working with strategic partners such as the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries (MALF) and farmer stakeholders to establish a system of aid for farmers to incentivize organic agriculture. This should be done by July 31, 2019;*
- *NAMDEVCO should develop an understanding of farmer-driven organic agriculture by conducting a survey to determine whether / how many farmers are involved in organic agriculture and their sales practices by July 31, 2019;*
- *NAMDEVCO should reserve spaces at its farmer's markets at preferential rates for farmers identified through recommendation 4(iii) to sell their organic produce once they comply with an agreed upon of mandatory or voluntary standards. This should be done by September 30, 2019;*
- *NAMDEVCO should emphasize the possibility for the hotels to access organic produce to create local food and beverage items for their international clients who are likely to be interested in this option as organic food is already well-known traditional tourist countries of origin. This should be done by July 31, 2019;*
- *NAMDEVCO should consult with MALF on the possibility of pursuing agreements with Canada and the US or determine whether such agreements already exist and report to Parliament on what exists and what can be done to establish further market expansion initiatives by March 31, 2019;*
- *NAMDEVCO should disseminate information to hotels and other tourist-oriented facilities about the range of local produce that could be used in their food and beverage offering in general as well as to create uniquely local dishes, desserts and drinks or to put a new spin on internationally known items. This should begin by May 31, 2019;*
- *NAMDEVCO should promote the provision of season-specific food and beverage by hotels as a way to give their international clients an authentic Trinidad and Tobago experience.*

This could include, for example, sorrel, ginger beer and black cake at Christmas time in addition to delicacies associated with other religious festivities. Caribbean Airlines' Caribbean Café initiative could be replicated with the hotel sector on a reduced scale, given NAMDEVCO's smaller market and budget. This should begin by May 31, 2019;

- *NAMDEVCO should submit a report presenting all the types of information to be shared on the platform and where such information exists and detailing stakeholders' readiness for the establishment of a shared information platform and challenges faced in the implementation process to Parliament by March 31, 2019;*
- *NAMDEVCO should write to Parliament with details of how it intends to revise its policy so that the AgriPrice App can send notifications every time prices change, and not only when there is a significant change, so that the prices indicated accurately reflect reality. Once greater confidence in the AgriPrice App is established, more people will download and use it. This should be done by April 30, 2019;*
- *NAMDEVCO should provide a timeline for the development of the new crop production data app, and the cost of establishing this app by April 30, 2019;*
- *NAMDEVCO should report to the Parliament on how it intends to fill its data gaps by March 31, 2019;*
- *NAMDEVCO should provide a breakdown of the research procedures it intends to use as well as the goals and expected outcomes of the research and how this would contribute to the development and expansion of markets and agribusiness investments in accordance with the Corporation's mandate, by March 31, 2019;*
- *NAMDEVCO should submit details of the Public Private Partnership Programme initiative concerning Packing Houses. This submission should include a timetable for implementation and a summary of the challenges faced and steps taken to address them. This should be done by March 31, 2019;*
- *NAMDEVCO should report to Parliament on measures it intends to take to address challenges with GLOBAL G.A.P certification by March 31, 2019; and*
- *NAMDEVCO should write to Parliament explaining what led to the decline of its activities in Tobago and the status of progress towards re-launching its initiatives there by March 31, 2019.*

Introduction

Establishment

The PAC of the Eleventh Republican Parliament was established by resolution of the House of Representatives and the Senate at the sittings held on Friday November 13, 2015 and Tuesday November 17, 2015 respectively.

Mandate

The Constitution of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago mandates that the Committee shall consider and report to the House appropriation accounts of moneys expended out of sums granted by Parliament to meet the public expenditure of Trinidad and Tobago and the report of the Auditor General on any such accounts.

In addition to the Committee's powers entrenched in the Constitution, the Standing Orders of the House of Representatives also empower the Committee (but is not limited) to:

- a) Send for persons, papers and records;
- b) Have meetings whether or not the House is sitting;
- c) Meet in various locations;
- d) Report from time to time; and
- e) Communicate with any other Committee on matters of common interest.

Ministerial Response

The Standing Orders⁴ provide for the Minister responsible for the Ministry or Body under review to submit within sixty (60) days a paper to the House responding to any recommendations or comments contained in the Report which are addressed to it.

Election of the Chairman and Vice Chairman

In accordance with section 119(2) of the Constitution, the Chairman must be a member of the Opposition in the House. At the first meeting held on Wednesday December 2, 2015 Dr. Bhoendradatt Tewarie was elected Chairman of the Committee. Mr. Taharqa Obika was elected Vice-Chairman of the Committee on December 13, 2017.

Establishment of Quorum

The Committee is required by the Standing Orders to have a quorum so that any decisions made by the Members during the meetings can be considered valid. A quorum of three (3) Members,

⁴ Standing Order 110 (6) in the [House of Representatives](#) and 100(6) of the [Senate](#).

inclusive of the Chair or Vice-Chairman), with representatives from both Houses was agreed to by the Committee at its First Meeting.

Determination of the Committee's Work Programme

The Committee agreed to a work programme for the Fourth Session of the Eleventh Parliament during its twenty-ninth meeting held on Wednesday December 12, 2018. These entities include:

1. Telecommunications Authority of Trinidad and Tobago (TATT);
2. National Agricultural Marketing and Development Corporation (NAMDEVCO);
3. National Carnival Commission (NCC);
4. Port Authority of Trinidad and Tobago (PATT)
5. National Lotteries Control Board (NLCB);
6. National Library and Information System Authority (NALIS);
7. Environmental Management Authority (EMA);
8. Ministry of Public Administration and Ministry of Planning & Development 2017 AGD Report ICT Findings);
9. Follow up with:
 - i. Water and Sewerage Authority;
 - ii. Trinidad and Tobago Electricity Commission;
 - iii. Airport Authority of Trinidad and Tobago;
 - iv. Chaguaramas Development Authority;
 - v. Trinidad and Tobago Bureau of standards; and
 - vi. Public Transport Service Corporation.
10. Auditor General's Report 2018;
11. Ministry of Energy & Energy Industries and Ministry of Finance (Revenue Collection);
12. Heritage and Stabilization Fund;
13. National Insurance Board of Trinidad and Tobago (NIB);
14. Sports and Cultural Fund; and
15. The College of Science, Technology and Applied Arts of Trinidad and Tobago (COSTAATT).

The Inquiry Process

The Inquiry Process outlines steps taken by the Committee when discussing the findings in the Audited Financial Statements and Management Letters of the NAMDEVCO for the financial years 2008 to 2011. The Inquiry Process agreed to by the PAC included the following steps:

- I. Identification of issues in the Audited Financial Statements and Management Letters of the NAMDEVCO for the financial years 2008 to 2011;
- II. Preparation of an Inquiry Proposal for the selected issues. The Inquiry Proposal outlines:
 - a. Background;
 - b. Objective of Inquiry; and
 - c. Proposed Questions.
- III. Questions for written responses were forwarded to NAMDEVCO on November 12, 2018 and responses received on January 3, 2019.
- IV. A public hearing was conducted and the relevant witnesses were invited to attend and provide evidence on January 9, 2019.
- V. Questions for additional responses were sent to NAMDEVCO on January 10, 2019 and responses received on January 25, 2019.
- VI. Report Committee's findings and recommendations to Parliament upon conclusion of the inquiry.

National Agricultural Marketing and Development Corporation (NAMDEVCO) Profile

Background: National Agricultural Marketing and Development Corporation

The NAMDEVCO is a Statutory body created by the National Agricultural Marketing and Development Corporation Act, Chap. 63:05 with a mandate “to create, facilitate and maintain an environment conducive to the efficient marketing of agricultural produce and food products through the provision of marketing services and the stimulation of business investment in the agro-industrial sector of Trinidad and Tobago”.⁵

Vision

Leading Trinidad and Tobago in agricultural marketing and agribusiness solutions that will contribute to the social and economic well-being of all our stakeholders.

Mission

Committed to the growth and sustainability of Trinidad and Tobago’s agricultural sector by the offering of agribusiness and marketing solutions through commercial partnerships and linkages with key stakeholders, in order to produce high quality primary and value-added food products at fair and competitive prices, to targeted markets.

Members of the Board of Directors

- Mr. Dennis Ramdeen (Chairman)
- Mr. Wayne Inniss (Deputy Chairman)
- Ms. Ann Marie Dardaine
- Mr. Kodi Moore
- Mr. Marc A. Jardine
- Mr. Rayber Bowen
- Mr. Stefan Ramroop
- Mr. Felix Clarke

Senior Management

- Mrs. Nirmala Debysingh-Persad – Chief Executive Officer (Ag.)
- Mr. Prakash Ragbir – Manager, Information and Communication Technology
- Mr. Lincoln Parmasar – Manager, Finance and Administration
- Mr. Akino Greene – Manager, Human Resources

⁵ The National Agricultural Marketing and Development Corporation Act, Chap. 63:05 accessed on Monday January 11, 2019 http://rgd.legalaffairs.gov.tt/laws2/alphabetical_list/lawspdfs/63.05.pdf

Line Ministry

Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries - Senator the Honourable Clarence Rambharat

Accounting Officer

Ms. Lydia Jacobs – Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries

Background: Auditor General

The Auditor General is required by law to examine and report annually to Parliament on the accounts of Ministries, Departments, Regional Health Authorities, Regional Corporations and such State Controlled Enterprises and Statutory Boards for which the Auditor General is the statutory auditor. The portfolio also includes the audit of:

- The accounts of projects funded partly or wholly by International Lending Agencies
- All pensions, gratuities and other separation benefits paid by the State in accordance with the Pensions Acts and other Agreements; and
- The grant of credit on the Exchequer Account in accordance with the requirements of section 18 of the Exchequer and Audit Act, chapter 69:01

The audit services take the form of financial audits, compliance audits and value for money audits intended to promote:

- Accountability
- Adherence to laws and regulations
- Economy, efficiency and effectiveness in the collection, disbursement and use of funds and other resources.

The duties and powers of the Auditor General are defined in the Exchequer and Audit Act Chapter 69:01 of the laws of Trinidad and Tobago.

Auditor General - Mr. Majeed Ali

Issues and Recommendations

During the examination of the Audited Financial Statements of NAMDEVCO for the financial years 2008 to 2011, the following issues were identified and recommendations proposed:

1. Marketing and Market Development Personnel

The absence of officers dedicated to the marketing function represents a serious weakness for NAMDEVCO in the fulfilment of its mandate, which is “to develop and expand markets, marketing opportunities and agribusiness investments”⁶. Because of a hiring freeze which came into effect at the end of 2017, all other posts related to marketing or market development were vacant, except for the post of Manager, Market Facilitation. Therefore, there was little to no expert information available to the CEO to inform strategic decisions on the function at the core of NAMDEVCO as a marketing organisation. The filling of these key vacancies was one of the priorities of the Strategic Plan, which has not yet been completed. For the time being, the responsibility for conducting some marketing-related activities has been absorbed by other departments of the Corporation such as the Farmers’ Market Unit.

Recommendations:

- i. NAMDEVCO should provide an explanation of its current procedures for handling its marketing function in the absence of marketing-related officers by March 31, 2019; and*
- ii. NAMDEVCO should provide a status update on a timetable for the completion of its Strategic Plan by March 31, 2019.*

2. Audited Financial Statements

NAMDEVCO’s audited financial statements are outdated and its credibility was called into question by inaccuracies. There was a case of balances not being reconciled in the audited accounts up to 2011. This was possibly a consequence of human resource deficiencies at the Corporation. The Corporation recognized the need to improve accounting procedures. The fact that audited financial statements were only available up to 2011 also represents a point that needs to be improved upon. The Auditor General’s Department expected to audit NAMDEVCO’s financial statements from 2012 up to 2017 the by end of 2019.

⁶ NAMDEVCO website, *About Us*, accessed on February 6, 2019: <http://www.namdevco.com/aboutus/>

Recommendation:

- i. ***NAMDEVCO should provide Parliament as a matter of urgency with details of the improvements to be made to its accounting policies and procedures as well as a description of its in-house training to guide staff in the preparation of the financial statements by March 31, 2019.***

3. Accounts Receivable

NAMDEVCO's debt recovery policy did not provide for the recovery of long term and small debt. The Corporation's accounts receivable includes many debts older than 90 days, as well as a number of debts of very small amounts including under \$10. While the Corporation's debt collection initiatives have had some measure of success, they could be much more effective than they are. As a result, NAMDEVCO has stopped credit sales in all but a few exceptional cases and has resorted to engaging a collection agency to secure receipt of monies owed.

Recommendations:

- i. ***NAMDEVCO should provide the Parliament with a copy of its standard debt recovery procedure by March 31, 2019;***
- ii. ***NAMDEVCO should write to Parliament setting out the status of its cleanup effort regarding its accounts receivable register and the rationale for any items removed from the said register, by March 31, 2019; and***
- iii. ***NAMDEVCO should submit a progress report on efforts by the collection agency hired to pursue its bad debtors by March 31, 2019.***

4. Organic Foods

NAMDEVCO does not identify produce as organic under its Farm Certification and Monitoring Programme or promote organic agriculture through any of its initiatives. This means that opportunities are being missed to derive economic and ecological benefit from this growing market. Although organic agriculture represents only 2% of global food sales, it has high growth potential. The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations defines organic agriculture as follows⁷:

“Organic agriculture is a system that relies on ecosystem management rather than external agricultural inputs. It is a system that begins to consider potential environmental and social impacts by eliminating the use of synthetic inputs, such as synthetic fertilizers and pesticides, veterinary drugs, genetically modified seeds and breeds, preservatives,

⁷ Food and Agriculture Organization, *FAQs – What is Organic Agriculture?*, accessed on January 24, 2019: <http://www.fao.org/organicag/oa-faq/oa-faq1/en/>

additives and irradiation. These are replaced with site-specific management practices that maintain and increase long-term soil fertility and prevent pest and diseases”.

Food safety is the focus of NAMDEVCO’s Farm Certification and Monitoring Programme. Identifying food as organic is not currently within the scope of the Corporation’s activities. Organic certification is done through the adherence to a combination of international voluntary standards, national mandatory standards and national voluntary standards.

International voluntary standards include⁸:

- The Codex Alimentarius Guidelines of the FAO; and
- The International Basic Standards for Organic Production and Processing, created by the International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements (IFOAM).

These voluntary standards are used and adapted by States to formulate their own national mandatory standards. National voluntary standards are those put forward by private certification bodies, but which are not legally binding.

According to the FAO, development of organic agriculture can be promoted in three (3) ways:

Circumstance	Description
Consumer or market-driven	Products are clearly identified through certification and labelling. Consumers take a conscious decision on how their food is produced, processed, handled and marketed. The consumer therefore has a strong influence over organic production.
Service-driven	In countries such as in the European Union (EU), subsidies for organic agriculture are available to generate environmental goods and services.
Farmer-driven	In many developing countries, organic agriculture is adopted as a method to improve household food security or to achieve a reduction of input costs. Produce is not necessarily sold on the market or is sold without a price distinction as it is not certified. In developed countries, small farmers are increasingly developing direct channels to

⁸ Food and Agriculture Organization, What is Behind an Organic Label?, accessed on January 24, 2019: <http://www.fao.org/organicag/oa-faq/oa-faq3/en/>

	deliver non-certified organic produce to consumers.
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The potential economic benefit of promoting organic agriculture is a stimulation of demand for local agricultural produce through the creation of an organic produce niche market which may then grow to become much larger. Ecologically⁹, enhances soil quality, reduces soil erosion, reduces pollution of groundwater, promotes biodiversity and combats climate change by reducing greenhouse gas emissions.

Recommendations:

- i. NAMDEVCO should create conditions conducive to the strengthening of market-driven organic agriculture by creating national mandatory standards for identifying and labelling produce as organic to give consumers the opportunity to show the extent of their interest in organic produce. This should be done by July 31, 2019;*
- ii. NAMDEVCO should promote service-driven organic agriculture by working with strategic partners such as the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries (MALF) and farmer stakeholders to establish a system of aid for farmers to incentivize organic agriculture. This should be done by July 31, 2019;*
- iii. NAMDEVCO should develop an understanding of farmer-driven organic agriculture by conducting a survey to determine whether / how many farmers are involved in organic agriculture and their sales practices by July 31, 2019;*
- iv. NAMDEVCO should reserve spaces at its farmer's markets at preferential rates for farmers identified through recommendation 4(iii) to sell their organic produce once they comply with an agreed upon of mandatory or voluntary standards. This should be done by September 30, 2019; and*
- v. NAMDEVCO should emphasize the possibility for the hotels to access organic produce to create local food and beverage items for their international clients who are likely to be interested in this option as organic food is already well-known traditional tourist countries of origin. This should be done by July 31, 2019.*

5. International Plant Health Regulations

A weevil problem is affecting the export of sweet potatoes. Plant quarantine certificates are required for the export of Trinidad and Tobago's agricultural produce to international markets such as Canada and the United States. MALF is the official local authority for the International

⁹ Food and Agricultural Organization, *What are the environmental benefits of organic agriculture?*, accessed on January 24, 2019: <http://www.fao.org/organicag/oa-faq/oa-faq6/en/>

Plant Protection Convention (1997). Article 4(2) of the Convention states that official plant protection organizations in each country are responsible, inter alia, for¹⁰:

- i. The issuance of certificates relating to the phytosanitary regulations of the importing contracting party for consignments of plants, plant products and other regulated articles; and
- ii. The inspection of consignments of plants and plant products moving in international traffic.

States may enter into supplementary agreements on specific issues as the need arises. These agreements would be valid only to the States directly concerned. One example of this is the 1999 Agreement on Collaboration in the Area of Quarantine and Plant Protection between GORTT and the Government of the Republic of Cuba. One of the goals of this Agreement was to promote agricultural trade between the two (2) countries through joint plant health initiatives ensuring that these issues would not be an obstacle to trade.

Recommendation:

- i. ***NAMDEVCO should consult with MALF on the possibility of pursuing agreements with Canada and the US or determine whether such agreements already exist and report to Parliament on what exists and what can be done to establish further market expansion initiatives by March 31, 2019.***

6. Collaboration with the Tourism Sector

NAMDEVCO does not have a specific plan to maintain profitable working relationships with tourism stakeholders. The World Trade Organization (WTO)¹¹ explains that tourism is the third largest export commodity, providing 9% of the world's jobs and 10% of global GDP. As a service export, tourism can help small economies – like Trinidad and Tobago where the sector has plenty of room to grow – with their economic development. Food and beverage provision is a core component of the tourism value chain; as such, promoting the increased and sustained use of local agricultural inputs in food and beverage provided at hotels and other facilities catering to tourists would open up a valuable export market outlet for local produce. The Committee recognizes the *Caribbean Café* initiative launched in 2018 by Caribbean Airlines whereby manufactured food and drink products from the Caribbean region including snacks, alcoholic beverages and bitters are included for sale as in-flight refreshments. This increases local products' international visibility

¹⁰ Food and Agriculture Organization, International Plant Protection Convention – Convention Text, accessed on February 4, 2019: <https://www.ippc.int/en/core-activities/governance/convention-text/>

¹¹ World Trade Organization, *Tourism sector highlighted as important contributor to trade and development*, accessed on January 26, 2019: https://www.wto.org/english/news_e/news16_e/bus_13jul16_e.htm

Recommendations:

- i. NAMDEVCO should disseminate information to hotels and other tourist-oriented facilities about the range of local produce that could be used in their food and beverage offering in general as well as to create uniquely local dishes, desserts and drinks or to put a new spin on internationally known items. This should begin by May 31, 2019; and*
- ii. NAMDEVCO should promote the provision of season-specific food and beverage by hotels as a way to give their international clients an authentic Trinidad and Tobago experience. This could include, for example, sorrel, ginger beer and black cake at Christmas time in addition to delicacies associated with other religious festivities. Caribbean Airlines' Caribbean Café initiative could be replicated with the hotel sector on a reduced scale, given NAMDEVCO's smaller market and budget. This should begin by May 31, 2019.*

7. Information Sharing Platform

The capacity to put information held by various stakeholders to the most effective use is hindered by the absence of a common platform. The development and management of a comprehensive Agricultural Market Information System is one of the mandates of NAMDEVCO. Key stakeholders including NAMDEVCO, the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries and the Agricultural Development Bank all have their own information databases or portals. Notably, NAMDEVCO has the National Agriculture Market Information System (NAMIS). The advantages of a shared information platform have been acknowledged by the agriculture sector's stakeholders and discussions are underway to determine how the necessary platform can be established. NAMDEVCO plans to include farmers by providing them with information via the platform that would enable them to diagnose diseases in their crops and take quick action on matters of plant health.

There was some overlap in terms of the types of data used by stakeholders. A common platform would enable stakeholders to communicate with each other and keep up to date on the activities of their partners and to mutually take each other's data into account when making decisions about their respective initiatives. The resulting decisions would be more coherent and better informed across the board as decision-makers would have a more comprehensive view of the key issues in the sector and the linkages among them.

Recommendation:

- i. NAMDEVCO should submit a report presenting all the types of information to be shared on the platform and where such information exists and detailing stakeholders' readiness for the establishment of a shared information platform and challenges faced in the implementation process to Parliament by March 31, 2019.*

8. NAMDEVCO Mobile App

The success of the AgriPrice App is compromised by a lack of reliability. The AgriPrice (Market Watcher) App¹² was released on January 28, 2015. The App was developed by AgriNeTT¹³, which is an agriculture ICT project of the University of the West Indies (UWI), St Augustine. It has been downloaded over one thousand (1,000) times. The purpose of the app was to provide updated information on the prices of crops in Trinidad and Tobago based on data gathered by NAMDEVCO. It was meant to allow users to keep track of movements in crop prices in real time through automatic notifications when prices change by a significant amount, and to observe price trends over extended periods of time.

The App has a 3.2 stars rating based on eight (8) user reviews. One (1) review of the App highlights that the price information it shows is not always inaccurate, thus making the App misleading.

Another app is in the works whereby farmers will be able to upload their crop production information and geo-locate their lots of land.

Recommendations:

- i. ***NAMDEVCO should write to Parliament with details of how it intends to revise its policy so that the AgriPrice App can send notifications every time prices change, and not only when there is a significant change, so that the prices indicated accurately reflect reality. Once greater confidence in the AgriPrice App is established, more people will download and use it. This should be done by April 30, 2019; and***
- ii. ***NAMDEVCO should provide a timeline for the development of the new crop production data app, and the cost of establishing this app by April 30, 2019.***

9. Statistics

NAMDEVCO lacks data to provide a comprehensive view of agricultural production and capacity. The Corporation has no statistics on the total number of unregistered farmers and fishermen or the total number of active farmers producing crops on state and private lands respectively. Without such information there is a policy disconnect in that NAMDEVCO has no way of knowing the full extent of farming and fishing activity in Trinidad and Tobago and can never be sure of the penetration rate of its initiatives, or of the relevance of its programmes to the existing needs of potentially numerous farmers and fishermen it is not aware of.

Recommendation:

- i. ***NAMDEVCO should report to the Parliament on how it intends to fill its data gaps by March 31, 2019.***

¹² Google Play, AgriPrice (Market Watcher), accessed on February 4, 2019:

<https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=com.agrinett.marketwatcher&hl=en>

¹³ UWI St Augustine, AgriNeTT About, accessed on February 5, 2019:

<https://sta.uwi.edu/rdifund/projects/agrinett/about.asp>

10. Research Activities

There is a lack of analytical research at NAMDEVCO despite the abundant data it collects. Currently, there is no approved framework for the Corporation's research function. This issue was addressed in the still incomplete Strategic Plan. Thorough qualitative and quantitative research is crucial in order to interpret the raw data collected and turn it into concrete policy and is just as important as the sharing of the information with other stakeholders as per item (5) above.

Recommendation:

- i. NAMDEVCO should provide a breakdown of the research procedures it intends to use as well as the goals and expected outcomes of the research and how this would contribute to the development and expansion of markets and agribusiness investments in accordance with the Corporation's mandate, by March 31, 2019.***

11. Sources of Revenue

NAMDEVCO needs to develop new streams of revenue to complement its subvention. Other than the annual subvention, NAMDEVCO earns income from fees from the public, from farmers and from people who use its different facilities. Packing Houses are a revenue earning opportunity for the Corporation. A Public Private Partnership Programme related to Packing Houses is being considered, but this has been identified as a difficult initiative.

Recommendation:

- i. NAMDEVCO should submit details of the Public Private Partnership Programme initiative concerning Packing Houses. This submission should include a timetable for implementation and a summary of the challenges faced and steps taken to address them. This should be done by March 31, 2019.***

12. Trade with the European Union

Due to market access obstacles, Trinidad and Tobago was missing out on export opportunities in the European Union. The European Union is a market of over 500 million consumers. Export volumes to the European market were always relatively small. However, they have become even smaller, partly because of the obligation to meet stringent trade standards. Farmers have to be GLOBALG.A.P certified. The five-step certification process entails consulting with an approved certification body, of which there are none in Trinidad and Tobago according to GlobalG.A.P's list of Approved Certification Bodies¹⁴. This makes the certification process slower, possibly more

¹⁴ GLOBALG.A.P, *Find Your GLOBALG.A.P Approved Certification Body*, accessed on February 4, 2019: https://www.globalgap.org/uk_en/what-we-do/the-gg-system/certification/Approved-CBs/index.html

costly and by extension makes exporting to Europe less attractive than other comparatively easier to access alternative markets.

Recommendation:

- i. **NAMDEVCO should report to Parliament on measures it intends to take to address challenges with GLOBAL G.A.P certification by March 31, 2019.**

13. NAMDEVCO's Presence in Tobago

Tobago farmers are underserved, as they have no direct access to most of NAMDEVCO's services. Although NAMDEVCO works with the Tobago House of Assembly on some agricultural issues, the Corporation no longer has facilities in Tobago nor does it carry out any of its own initiatives there or have any statistics on farmers there. Attempts are now being made to re-establish NAMDEVCO's presence and activities in Tobago to the benefit of farmers there.

Recommendation:

- i. **NAMDEVCO should write to Parliament explaining what led to the decline of its activities in Tobago and the status of progress towards re-launching its initiatives there by March 31, 2019.**

Concluding Remarks

NAMDEVCO's work with farmers and fishermen is of vital importance as enhancing and sustaining agriculture is key to economic diversification and development. Strong agricultural production facilitates a reduction of the food import bill and increased food security, which have economic and social benefits respectively. While Trinidad and Tobago does not face the degree of problems of undernourishment and food insecurity faced elsewhere in the developing world, more needs to be done to completely eradicate these problems; undernourishment hovers at around 5% in 2017 according to FAO statistics¹⁵.

This is where NAMDEVCO must play its role as a facilitator of agricultural growth to the fullest in providing reliable information, developing markets and encouraging investment. As such, hiring marketing and market development officers is of the utmost importance. Equally important is the need to further incorporate advances in ICTs such as big data – which the Corporation has already been doing to varying levels of success – to ensure that all stakeholders have access to information to guide their choices to the overall benefit of the sector both in terms of demand and supply.

Particularly on the supply side of the sector, NAMDEVCO also must step up its efforts to have comprehensive and updated figures on the numbers of farmers currently active, whether or not they are registered, and the amount, location and status of the land on which they plant. Without this information, much of the Corporation's efforts may be wasted as policies would be formulated without a full understanding of the target audience the policies are meant to apply to and the areas that need the most attention. This results in an inefficient allocation of scarce public resources.

NAMDEVCO must ensure timely submission of its financial statements to the Auditor General's Department, see to it that even the smallest discrepancies in its transactions are corrected and take steps to ensure that unpaid debts do not accumulate.

Marketing is generally supported by production and the reliability of production supplies. Expansion of market opportunities is dependent on increased production. Planning production targets requires knowledge of farmlands under production and active farmers engaged in agricultural production.

Moreover land tenure issues plague the farming community and the gap in available opportunities for registered farmers and unregistered farmers negatively affects the production process; farmers with land tenure problems are often denied registration.

The issues of land tenure, registration of farmers and an up to date accurate database are essential to an effective marketing effort. NAMDEVCO should therefore action a project, with support from the Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries, and in collaboration with other

¹⁵ Food and Agriculture Organization, *FAO Stat – Trinidad and Tobago*, accessed on February 5, 2019: <http://www.fao.org/faostat/en/#country/220>

stakeholders, to fast-track the issue of land tenure regularization and farmer registration for all active farmers in Trinidad and Tobago.

This Committee respectfully submits this Report for the consideration of the Parliament.

Sgd.
Dr. Bhoendradatt Tewarie
Chairman

Sgd.
Mr. Taharqa Obika
Vice - Chairman

Sgd.
Mrs. Ayanna Webster-Roy
Member

Sgd.
Mr Randall Mitchell
Member

Sgd.
Mr. Adrian Leonce
Member

Sgd.
Mrs. Paula Gopee-Scoon
Member

Sgd.
Dr. Lester Henry
Member

Sgd.
Mrs. Charrise Seepersad
Member

Appendix I

Witnesses

At the meeting held on January 9, 2019, the witnesses attending on behalf of the National Agricultural Marketing and Development Corporation, the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries and the Auditor General's Department were:

National Agricultural Marketing and Development Corporation (NAMDEVCO)

- | | | |
|------------------------------------|---|-------------------------------------|
| • Mr. Dennis Ramdeen | - | Chairman, Board of Directors |
| • Mr. Wayne Inniss | - | Deputy Chairman, Board of Directors |
| • Mr. Felix Clarke | - | Member, Board of Directors |
| • Mrs. Nirmalla Debysingh – Persad | - | Chief Executive Officer |
| • Mrs. Camille Mohan – Cayenne | - | Corporate Secretary |
| • Mr. Lincoln Parmasar | - | Manager, Finance and Administration |
| • Mr. Prakash Ragbir | - | Manager, ICT |
| • Mr. Akino Greene | - | Manager, Human Resource |
| • Mr. Christopher Alexander | - | Head (Ag.), Farmers' Market Unit |

Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries

- | | | |
|-----------------------|---|--|
| • Ms. Lydia Jacobs | - | Permanent Secretary |
| • Mr. Farook Hosein | - | Deputy Permanent Secretary |
| • Mr. Dirk Ramdin | - | Senior Legal Officer |
| • Ms. Neela Maharaj | — | Director, Agricultural Planning Division |
| • Ms. Marlene Andrews | — | Planning Officer |

Auditor General's Department (AGD)

- | | | |
|------------------------|---|-----------------------------------|
| • Mr. Louis Hernandez | - | Assistant Auditor General (Ag.) |
| • Ms. Reahla Balroop | - | Assistant Auditor General (Ag.) |
| • Mrs. Simone Wajadali | - | Assistant Audit Director Division |

**THE PUBLIC ACCOUNTS COMMITTEE –
FOURTH SESSION, ELEVENTH PARLIAMENT
MINUTES OF THE THRITIETH MEETING HELD ON WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 9, 2019 AT 10:04
A.M.**

**IN THE ARNOLD THOMASOS (EAST) MEETING ROOM, LEVEL 6, AND IN THE J. HAMILTON
MAURICE ROOM, MEZZANINE FLOOR, OFFICE OF THE PARLIAMENT, TOWER D, THE PORT OF
SPAIN INTERNATIONAL WATERFRONT CENTRE, 1A WRIGHTSON ROAD, PORT-OF-SPAIN.**

Present were:

Dr. Bhoendradatt Tewarie	-	Chairman
Mr. Taharqa Obika	-	Vice - Chairman
Dr. Lester Henry	-	Member
Ms. Charrise Seepersad	-	Member
Mrs. Ayanna Webster-Roy	-	Member
Ms. Hema Bhagaloo	-	Assistant Secretary
Mr. Darien Buckmire	-	Graduate Research Assistant
Mr. Justin Jarrette	-	Graduate Research Assistant

Excused were:

Mr. Randall Mitchell	-	Member
Mr. Adrian Leonce	-	Member
Mrs. Paula Gopee-Scoon	-	Member

COMMENCEMENT

- 1.1 At 10:04 a.m. the Chairman called the meeting to order and welcomed those present. Mr. Randall Mitchell, Mrs. Paula Gopee-Scoon and Mr. Adrian Leonce, were excused from the Meeting.

THE EXAMINATION OF THE MINUTES OF THE TWENTY- NINTH MEETING

- 2.1 The Committee examined the Minutes of the Twenty-Ninth (29th) Meeting held on Wednesday December 12, 2018.

- 2.2 There being no omissions or corrections, the Minutes were confirmed on a motion moved by Ms. Charrise Seepersad and seconded by Mr. Taharqa Obika.

MATTERS ARISING FROM THE MINUTES OF THE TWENTY- NINTH MEETING

- 3.1 With reference to item 6.1, the Chairman informed the Members that the Nineteenth and Twenty-First Reports of the Committee were laid in the House of Representatives and Senate on December 17 and 18, 2018, respectively.
- 3.2 With reference to item 9.5, the Chairman informed the Members that a letter was sent to the Telecommunications Authority of Trinidad and Tobago (TATT) on December 14, 2018 requesting additional information.

PRE-HEARING DISCUSSION RE: NATIONAL AGRICULTURAL MARKETING AND DEVELOPMENT CORPORATION (NAMDEVCO)

- 4.1 The Committee agreed on the focus of the meeting which was the concerns raised in the Audited Financial Statements of the National Agricultural Marketing and Development Corporation for the years 2008 to 2011.
- 4.2 The Members discussed the issues of concern and the general approach for the Public Hearing.
- 4.3 There being no further business for discussion *in camera*, the Chairman suspended the meeting at 10:23 a.m.

EXAMINATION OF THE NATIONAL AGRICULTURAL MARKETING AND DEVELOPMENT CORPORATION (NAMDEVCO)

- 5.1 The Chairman called the public meeting to order at 10:39 a.m.
- 5.2 The Chairman welcomed officials from the Auditor General's Department (AGD), the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries, the National Agricultural Marketing and Development Corporation (NAMDEVCO), members of the media and the public to the Thirtieth (30th) meeting with the PAC and introductions were exchanged.
- 5.3 The following officials joined the meeting:

National Agricultural Marketing and Development Corporation (NAMDEVCO)

- | | | |
|------------------------------------|---|-------------------------------------|
| • Mr. Dennis Ramdeen | - | Chairman, Board of Directors |
| • Mr. Wayne Inniss | - | Deputy Chairman, Board of Directors |
| • Mr. Felix Clarke | - | Member, Board of Directors |
| • Mrs. Nirmalla Debysingh – Persad | - | Chief Executive Officer |

- Mrs. Camille Mohan – Cayenne - Corporate Secretary
- Mr. Lincoln Parmasar - Manager, Finance and Administration
- Mr. Prakash Ragbir - Manager , ICT
- Mr. Akino Greene - Manager, Human Resource
- Mr. Christopher Alexander - Head (Ag.), Farmers’ Market Unit

Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries

- Ms. Lydia Jacobs - Permanent Secretary
- Mr. Farook Hosein - Deputy Permanent Secretary
- Mr. Dirk Ramdin - Senior Legal Officer
- Ms. Neela Maharaj – Director, Agricultural Planning Division
- Ms. Marlene Andrews – Planning Officer

Auditor General’s Department (AGD)

- Mr. Louis Hernandez - Assistant Auditor General (Ag.)
- Ms. Reahla Balroop - Assistant Auditor General (Ag.)
- Mrs. Simone Wajadali - Assistant Audit Director Division

5.4 Key Topics Discussed:

1. The primary objectives of the NAMDEVCO.
2. The lack of marketing officers at the NAMDEVCO.
3. The status of the Farm to Table Programme.
4. The status of the nine (9) farmers’ markets and two (2) wholesale fish markets.
5. The status of improvement works at the Brechin Castle and Brickfield packing houses.
6. The technological upgrades made to the Macoya Wholesale Market.
7. The status of improvement works at the Woodford Lodge Central Market Facility.
8. The value added by the NAMDEVCO to the economy.
9. The role of ICTs in the NAMDEVCO’s operations.
10. The NAMDEVCO’s information collection and dissemination systems.
11. The absence of a centralised information sharing platform among related stakeholders including the NAMDEVDO, the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries and the Agricultural Development Bank (ADB).

12. The lack of available information at the NAMDEVCO on the 10,000 farmers not under the Farm Certification and Monitoring Programme and the need to have readily available information on the locations of these farmers, the number of acres cultivated, and the product produced to develop a proper agricultural production strategy.
13. The improvement of computer systems used for processing transactions at facilities operated by the NAMDEVCO.
14. The incorporation of international food safety management guidelines for food processing and sale (Seafood HACCP – Hazard Analysis & Critical Control Point).
15. The function of the Piarco Packing House in facilitating export of agricultural commodities as well as processing for the local market.
16. The role of NAMISSTT (National Agricultural Marketing Information System) in providing real time price and volume data for agricultural produce.
17. The total number of farmers, registered and unregistered, in Trinidad and Tobago.
18. The challenges in estimating the number of active farmers out of the country's 13,000 farmers.
19. The proportion of the country's farmers who use the NAMDEVCO's facilities.
20. The NAMDEVCO's efforts to expand its reach to encourage unregistered farmers to use the facilities at the NAMDEVCO.
21. The relationship between the NAMDEVCO and the farmers.
22. The functioning of the Farm Certification and Monitoring Programme in terms of marketing and plant health advice provided to the 2,300 participating farmers.
23. The results of the trade mission to Canada.
24. The development and purpose of the Good Agricultural Practices Programme (TT GAP).
25. The compliance with US government regulations under the Food Safety Modernization Act to increase farmers' access to the international markets
26. The decline of exports to the European market.
27. The provision of information and services by the NAMDEVCO to unregistered farmers.
28. The role of the NAMDEVCO compared to the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries.
29. The NAMDEVCO's current inactivity in and lack of up to date information on Tobago.
30. The status of the outstanding audited financial statements for the years 2012 to 2017.
31. The measures in place to rectify the issues identified in the audited financial statements.
32. The measures in place to rectify the audit issues.
33. The lack of policies and procedures in place to address accounting deficiencies.
34. The status of the NAMDEVCO's debt recovery policy and procedures.
35. The status of the NAMDEVCO's accounts receivables register.
36. The feasibility of incorporating tourism into the NAMDEVCO's objectives.
37. The marketing strategies in place to generate additional revenue both locally and internationally.

- 38. The possibility of the NAMDEVCO becoming financially sustainable.
- 39. The sanitary and phytosanitary issues affecting sweet potatoes.
- 40. The potential to identify produce as organic.

Please see the attached verbatim notes for the detailed oral submission by the witnesses.

- 5.5 The Committee agreed to send additional questions to the NAMDEVCO and the Line Ministry for written submission.

[Please see Appendix 1]

- 5.6 The Chairman thanked the representatives from the Auditor General's Department, Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries, NAMDEVCO, members of the media, the public and the Members of the Committee for their attendance.

ADJOURNMENT

- 6.1 The adjournment was taken at 12:16p.m.

We certify that these Minutes are true and correct.

CHAIRMAN

SECRETARY

January 9, 2018

January 9, 2019

VERBATIM NOTES OF THE THIRTIETH MEETING OF THE PUBLIC ACCOUNTS COMMITTEE HELD IN THE J. HAMILTON MAURICE ROOM, MEZZANINE FLOOR (IN PUBLIC) TOWER D, THE PORT OF SPAIN INTERNATIONAL WATERFRONT CENTRE, 1A WRIGHTSON ROAD, PORT OF SPAIN, ON WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 09, 2019, AT 10.04 A.M.

PRESENT

Dr. Bhoendradatt Tewarie	Chairman
Mr. Taharqa Obika	Vice Chairman
Mr. Adrian Leonce	Member
Mr. Randall Mitchell	Member
Ms. Keiba Jacob	Secretary
Ms. Hema Bhagaloo	Assistant Secretary
Mr. Darien Buckmire	Research Assistant

ABSENT

Dr. Lester Henry	Member
Ms. Melissa Ramkissoon	Member
Mrs. Ayanna Webster-Roy	Member
Mrs. Paula Gopee-Scoon	Member

AUDITOR GENERAL'S DEPARTMENT

Mr. Shiva Sinanan	Asst. Auditor General
Mr. Riaz Ali	Asst. Audit Director
Ms. Cyntra Neemarcharan	Asst. Audit Director

MINISTRY OF PLANNING AND DEVELOPMENT

Ms. Joanne Deoraj	Permanent Secretary
Ms. Melanie Noel	Dir. Human Resources
Mrs. Indra Singh-Jaikaran	Auditor II
Mrs. Jacqueline Weekes-Penco	Director, Planning Unit
Ms. Andrea Julien	Senior State Counsel

National Agricultural Marketing and Development Corporation (NAMDEVCO)

• Mr. Dennis Ramdeen	Chairman, Board of Directors
• Mr. Wayne Inniss	Deputy Chairman, Board of Directors
• Mr. Felix Clarke	Member, Board of Directors
• Mrs. Nirmalla Debysingh – Persad	Chief Executive Officer
• Mrs. Camille Mohan – Cayenne	Corporate Secretary

- | | |
|-----------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| • Mr. Lincoln Parmasar | Manager, Finance and Administration |
| • Mr. Prakash Ragbir | Manager , ICT |
| • Mr. Akino Greene | Manager, Human Resource |
| • Mr. Christopher Alexander | Head (Ag.), Farmers' Market Unit |

Mr. Chairman: Good morning everybody, welcome to this meeting of the Public Accounts Committee. I want to especially welcome members from the Auditor General's Department, thank you for coming; members of the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries; the National Agricultural Marketing and Development Corporation (NAMDEVCO); the members of the media who are present; and of course the general public, some of whom are in the public gallery, but many of whom might be looking at this particular programme.

My name is Bhoendradatt Tewarie, I am the Chair of this Committee. The purpose of this meeting of the Public Accounts Committee is to examine the audited financial statements of NAMDEVCO for the years 2008 to 2011. The Committee is desirous of hearing the challenges being faced by the key stakeholders at NAMDEVCO in an attempt to determine some of the possible solutions to these challenges. The role of this Committee is to help NAMDEVCO, the National Agricultural Marketing and Development Corporation, improve in any way possible, but more particularly its delivery of services in an efficient, effective and economic manner.

This meeting is being held in public and is being broadcast live on the Parliament's Channel 11 and Radio 105.5 FM and the Parliament's YouTube Channel, *ParlView*. Viewers and listeners can participate by sending their comments related to today's topic via email, parl101@tpparliament.org, facebook.com/tpparliament and [twitter@tpparliament](https://twitter.com/tpparliament).

I will ask the members of my Committee to introduce themselves. I have introduced myself already, and I will ask you all to introduce yourselves and then we will have a statement and we will proceed. Okay?

[Introductions made]

Mr. Chairman: I wonder if I can ask the members of the Auditor General's Department to please identify and introduce themselves.

[Introductions made]

Mr. Chairman: Okay, and from NAMDEVCO.

[Introductions made]

Mr. Chairman: Okay, and the Permanent Secretary and her team from Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries.

[Introductions made]

Mr. Chairman: Okay. I want to invite the Permanent Secretary and the Chairman of—*[Secretary confers with the Chairman]*—oh, there are more people, did I—I am sorry. I am sorry.

[Introductions continued]

Mr. Chairman: Okay, I want to thank each and every one of you for attending, we are happy to have you here, and we will proceed with the meeting in a minute. We are due to have a presentation from the PS and one from the Chairman of NAMDEVCO. Who would prefer to go first? Permanent Secretary? Yeah, I know you are going to give a brief statement, I just wanted to know, because yours would be the overview. Yes.

Ms. Jacobs: Morning again, everyone.

Mr. Chairman: Speak into the microphone eh, please.

Ms. Jacobs: The Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries has oversight at some levels for approximately 10 statutory boards and state enterprises, one of which is the National Agricultural Marketing and Development Company (NAMDEVCO). Today, we welcome the opportunity to lend clarity to any areas of ambiguity as the Committee examines the financial statements of this corporation for the period 2008 to 2011. Thank you.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you very much. Could I ask the Chairman to make his statement?

Mr. Ramdeen: Thank you, Chair. Morning. Morning, Chair, members of the Committee and attendees. The National Agricultural Marketing and Development Corporation, known as NAMDEVCO, was created by an Act of Parliament in 1991 to replace the Central Marketing Agency, better known as the CMA. The objectives of NAMDEVCO are wide ranging, and these are set out in detail in the said Act. Section 12 of the NAMDEVCO Act mandates that in the exercise of the powers and duties conferred and imposed on it by this Act, the Board shall comply with any special or general directions which may from time to time be given to it by the line Minister.

In respect of this, the hon. Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries had issued certain letters of expectations to the board, which served to set out the board's mandate. The main objects or objectives that were identified in these letters and as well in some live presentations by the Minister were the furtherance of the Farm-to-Table Programme. This programme aims to boost consumption of local produce by bringing the farmer closer to the consumer. The other main plank of the mandate was the delivery of two unfinished packing houses, and the Woodford Lodge facility to a state of readiness for public/private partnership contracts. To the best of our ability we have focused our efforts in furthering these primary objectives, taking into considerations the various challenges and treating with them as reasonably and diligently as we could. We thank this Committee and you, Chair, for the opportunity to attend this meeting and hope our contribution is well received.

Mr. Chairman: All right. Thank you very much Permanent Secretary, thank you very much Chairman. We are happy for that overview, and I will start immediately Chairman by asking some general questions, and remember the questions we ask are both for our own benefit as well as the benefit of the general public who might not know what NAMDEVCO does or how it operates.

So I am going to start by asking some general questions and then each of the members of the Committee will ask some questions. It is possible that we will also ask some questions to the Auditor General and revert to you on the basis of the response of the Auditor General. I will start immediately with what you said, which was your Farm-to-Table Programme, and then secondly, the status of the business that you were trying to complete, the packing houses. And what was the other thing that you mentioned? The two packing houses, and what else?

Mr. Ramdeen: And Woodford Lodge.

Mr. Chairman: And the Woodford Lodge. Okay. Could you give us a kind of update on where we are with those?

Mr. Ramdeen: Yes. I am going to pass to our CEO.

Mr. Chairman: Yes.

Mrs. Debysingh-Persad: Mr. Chairman, members of the Public Accounts Committee, through the Farm-to-Table initiative we have managed to establish, to date, nine farmers markets throughout the length and breadth of Trinidad. These farmers markets, as was mentioned, its

main prerogative is to develop the entrepreneurial ability of our farmers, whereby we bring farm-fresh foods closer to our consumers, thereby looking at increasing the nutritive components of the food reaching our consumers as well as reducing post-harvest losses. That is one of the greatest initiatives under the Farm-to-Table aspect of the programme. The next initiatives are the packing house completion programmes of which specifically we speak about Brechin Castle, Brickfield, and there is the Woodford Lodge Central Market facility.

Chair, please permit me to say at this time that the Brechin Castle Packing House is currently the subject of several legal matters, which are right now at a critical stage. Giving further details at this time may compromise NAMDEVCO's ability to properly treat with these matters. However, if I may, I am about to report on the Woodford Lodge Central Market Wholesale Facility; it is completed and we are making strides to operationalize that facility. Additionally, the Brickfield Packing House, there are some construction works in the form of electrical works that are currently being completed for operationalization.

Mr. Chairman: So you say Brechin Castle is involved in litigious matters and as a result you do not want to say anything about that. Woodford Lodge is completed and will be operationalized; Brickfield will be completed based on the things that you have to do, electrical, et cetera.

Mrs. Debysingh-Persad: That is correct.

Mr. Chairman: Okay, and you have established nine farmers markets to bring food, so to speak, to the general consumer from the farm. All right, I want to ask some further general questions and they are linked to that and what you do. All right? What would you say is the significant value of what NAMDEVCO does for agriculture and for the nation, Trinidad and Tobago? What do you think is the unique purposeful value that you create in the economy and the society, and especially for the agricultural sector?

Mrs. Debysingh-Persad: Okay, so there are several useful benefits that as a market and a market development corporation we bring to the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago. I will start with our wholesale market facilities, one of which is located at Macoya. It is perhaps one of the largest wholesale market facilities on the island. It is also well utilized by our Tobago counterparts. Further, that Macoya market facility is continuing to expand. We are introducing a lot of ICTs into the establishment and management of our markets.

I would like to say at this point in time that we are introducing a prepaid parking system at the market for buyers and vendors alike—buyers and sellers, my correction. Those are some of the upgrades to the existing wholesale market facilities that we have at NAMDEVCO. We also have another wholesale market facility at Debe; that said prepaid system is going to be rolled out to the Debe wholesale market in the very near future. We also manage two wholesale fish market facilities where we facilitate wholesale trade of fish and seafood products from the very wee hours of the morning, from as early as 3.00 a.m. to as late as 12.00 noon on certain days. Those fish markets facilitate our fisherfolk where we provide facilities for trade on all of the other entities that are necessary for successful trade of fish and seafood products.

Not only do we provide a facility, but we provide a facility that is guided by Seafood HACCP. Seafood HACCP, as you all would know is a food safety management tool to assist with safe sale of food and processing of food. We also have a packing house facility at Piarco that facilitates export of fresh agricultural produce to local, regional and exports markets, and I want to emphasize local because we are also in the process of assisting agro-processors who do not have suitable commercial facilities to process their products for local, regional and international markets. I would also like to draw your attention to once again our farmers market facilities, as I mentioned, those are some of the—that is another aspect of it. Including in all that we do, I would have mentioned our ICT systems.

I would like to mention NAMIS. NAMIS is a portal, it is a website that is used by many consumers that provides live data, real-time data on price and volume collected at our various markets, especially the Macoya wholesale market. Information is uploaded on a timely basis on the price and volume of produce that is traded at the market for that particular day. We are aware through our surveys that this information is used to make informed decisions by our supermarkets, our tourism sector, our caterers, and many other such institutions who are engaged in the trade of fresh fruits and vegetables throughout the island.

Mr. Chairman: Okay. Where are the wholesale fish markets?

Mrs. Debysingh-Persad: One is located in Orange Valley; the other one is located in Sea Lots, Port of Spain.

Mr. Chairman: Okay. How many farmers are there in the country, and how many of them sell

to you?

Mrs. Debysingh-Persad: So there are approximately 13,000 farmers in our country. Farmers do not sell to us, per se, but we provide a facility to allow them to trade and/or add value to their products.

Mr. Chairman: Well, how many of them use your facilities?

Mrs. Debysingh-Persad: On an average day we have over 500 farmers using our facilities. This is for trade purposes, for example, at the Macoya market. We also monitor. We have a farm certification and monitoring programme where we currently monitor approximately 2,300 farmers throughout the island on a four-to-six week rotational basis. Monitoring these farmers means offering technical advice, visiting their fields, collecting data on what is on the ground, and our field officers, which are the technical staff who go out to the farmers, they are trained in integrated pest management, they are also trained as plant doctors, plant clinic doctors, so they offer technical advice to our farmers. They bring back information into the corporation where there are farmers who are seeking marketing support, and through our marketing department, information is disseminated to our farmers on possible market avenues for the products that they are growing.

Mr. Chairman: This technical advice is provided by NAMDEVCO or by the Ministry of Agriculture?

Mrs. Debysingh-Persad: By NAMDEVCO.

Mr. Chairman: Okay. So you directly deal with 2,300 farmers?

Mrs. Debysingh-Persad: Currently, yes.

Mr. Chairman: And you have about 500 farmers participating through your market effort?

Mrs. Debysingh-Persad: At the market.

Mr. Chairman: So, is your concentration only the local market here? I know that you mentioned that you have a facility in Piarco, but, I mean, how do you divide your time and energy and effort in terms of getting food to the consumer in Trinidad and Tobago, and developing an export strategy for the country?

Mrs. Debysingh-Persad: So quite recently we would have had a team who would have visited Canada to look at export opportunities for local commodities in Canada. We are about to begin the registration process to have our local exporters seek opportunities to trade with Canada. One

of the significant things that NAMDEVCO is doing right now, under the gamut of food safety and export, is we are in the process of developing a good agricultural-practices programme for Trinidad and Tobago that is certifiable and will be audited by foreign auditors. The purpose of this TT GAP Programme, as we loosely call it right now, is to ensure that we open export market opportunities for our exporters specifically into the US market under the Food Safety Modernization Act.

That Act requires that exporters are trained and are guided by seven rules. What we have done thus far, we have attempted to train a lot of our stakeholders on the seven rules. We also have persons that are lead trainers at the corporation with respect to the Food Safety Modernization Act, some of the rules. Through this, we are attempting to prepare our exporters to meet the US import guidelines for fresh produce into their markets. This information is also going to be translated to our growers, or our farmers, in a state of readiness. So, in developing this GAP Programme, it is a food safety programme, because food safety starts on the field, and we are preparing our farmers to be certified food safe on the field so that their products can enter into the US markets. It is hoped that through this programme, it will also open opportunities for European markets as well as it would be recognized, and our regional partners, to facilitate regional trade of local produce.

Mr. Chairman: Okay, based on the numbers you gave me, there are about 2,800 farmers that you would know where they function, where they operate, what they produce, in what quantities, et cetera. How do you get information and is that information of any value to you for the other 10,000 farmers?

Mrs. Debysingh-Persad: Yes, we do get information from monitoring, and forms are completed on the field by the officers. It is put into a database. The information is collated and analyzed as necessary. Perhaps sometimes on a weekly or month basis, depending on the demand for the information. This information is made available to potential buyers whether it is for local or export markets. It is made available to CSO, it is made available to policymakers and other decision-makers. It is even made available to many of our institutional programmes, such as the school nutrition programme. So that sometimes they know what is available on the field when they are doing their menu plans for the school term.

Mr. Chairman: So, you have a database of 13,000 farmers, where they are located, how much land under cultivation, and what they produce?

Mrs. Debysingh-Persad: No, only for the 2,300 that we monitor. Because the programme is a voluntary programme, we, well, we would look at facilitating those farmers who want to join the programme. As time goes on, farmers continuously see the benefit of joining our programme, so the list continues to grow, of the number of certified farmers under the Farm Monitoring and Certification Programme of NAMDEVCO. But right now, the database has information of approximately 2,300 farmers island wide.

Mr. Chairman: Okay. But then, you do not have—are you telling me that you do not have information on the other 10,000?

Mrs. Debysingh-Persad: We do have some information, but not as in depth as we would have for the 2,300 that we currently monitor on a routine basis.

Mr. Chairman: Okay. Who has information on the 13,000 farmers? Who would have information on that? The Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries?

Mrs. Debysingh-Persad: Yes, the Ministry would have a database of the number of farmers through their Farmer Registration Programme, of all the farmers in the island.

Mr. Chairman: And what they produce, and where they are located?

Mr. Ramdeen: But the Ministry is here, Sir.

Ms. Jacobs: So, Chair, we do have significant information on registered farmers. As you know, there are farmers and some are registered and some are not. But that is one of the challenges we have experienced with all our entities, and as a result, sometime last year, around August, we would have met all the stakeholders with different kinds of information because we are looking at a platform that will allow us to share this kind of information, because we have some, NAMDEVCO has, then the Agricultural Development Bank may have information. So all our stakeholders, we have information, but we must develop a shared platform which will allow us to be able to communicate. So, we have started that discussion with all of these entities. But as she rightly said, they will have some information, we will have some information.

Mr. Chairman: Where does the figure 13,000 come from then?

Mrs. Debysingh-Persad: Chair, if—

Ms. Jacobs: I would not be able to answer that at this time.

Mrs. Debysingh-Persad: Sometime in the past our ICT department would have worked with the Ministry to develop some programmes, and that approximate figure came through that collaborative work at that time.

11.05 a.m.

Mr. Chairman: Okay. You see, the reason I asked that, I mean, if you know how many farmers you have and you know how much land is under their jurisdiction and you have a market understanding of what are your markets and what is needed, you could design a production system, you know, over the course of a 12-month period that would solve many, many problems. So that is why I am asking about the data and about the accuracy of it and the value of it. So—

Mr. Ramdeen: Chair, Chair.

Mr. Chairman: Yes.

Mr. Ramdeen: I would just want to be careful that NAMDEVCO would speak for the 2,300 farmers that we are aware of and deal with on a regular basis.

Mr. Chairman: Okay. So basically, NAMDEVCO deals with 500 farmers who address the local market through the system that you have and 2,300 other farmers that you liaise with in order to plan and organize in relation to that local market.

Mrs. Debysingh-Persad: That is inclusive of, because our certified farmers also access our wholesale and farmers market facilities.

Mr. Chairman: Okay. I understand now. So in a real sense, from the point of view of the value of farmers and agricultural production to the country, we have a problem of really knowing whether 10,000 other farmers are in the production business in agriculture, where they are, how many acres they have, and what they are producing. So we need, if we are to have a strategy for agricultural production and for agro-processing and all of these things, we need to have that basic data before us, not so?

Mrs. Debysingh-Persad: Yes.

Mr. Chairman: Okay, thank you very much. I will pass on to my colleagues and ask them to follow-up. Who would like to follow-up?

Ms. Seepersad: Chairman.

Mr. Chairman: Yes, please.

Ms. Seepersad: Good morning. I just want to follow-up on the Chairman's comments. What are you all doing to get information on these other farmers? Because it seems that there is a large number of persons whom you could be helping to improve their businesses, et cetera. Are you doing surveys—what are you doing to get information to expand your reach?

Mr. Ramdeen: Okay, so before the CEO gives the operational answer I just want to say that NAMDEVCO has limitations in terms of its resources. So we are not pretending to be able to take on the whole of Trinidad, and by the way, we cover Trinidad only, under the Act. And that we work together with the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries, but that—I am sure Nirmalla is going to give you an idea of some of the things that we do. But the main responsibility for the totality of farmers would be the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries and where we come in is with, in particular, enabling the marketing aspect of their enterprise.

Mrs. Debysingh-Persad: So while we have approximately 2,300 farmers registered with us it does not limit us to assist farmers who do not want to register with us. Through our NAMIS website, through our Facebook portal, through the many stakeholder forums which we hold, for example, a quite recent one is the Buyers Stakeholder Forum. We always get persons who are interested in the marketing of agricultural produce to contact us. So we are always sharing information, and that is one of the greatest facilities that we provide.

We have information in terms of price and volume data. We have data that can identify trends on the market, that can identify various facets of statistical information to be able to be used to make informed decisions. Even though there are farmers who are not on our programme they still access our services. Yeah? So they may call, they may visit our Facebook, they may visit our website, ask for information and the information is supplied to the farmer and/or agro-processor as the case might be. So while they do not want to join our programme, that is fine, we are still there to facilitate agricultural marketing.

Dr. Henry: Just to follow-up. Of the 13,000 so-called farmers, how many are legit? Do you have any idea how many are active, because I cannot believe we have 13,000 active farmers? So, in other words, to get an idea of what portion of the actual active farmers that you are servicing.

Mr. Ramdeen: So let me jump in here. I have been in this agricultural space only for the last

three or four years and based on what I have seen, I think it would be a bit of a guessing game to call a number, one. Two, people who have come out of farming, whether they have been struck from the list, and some people who have not even considered themselves to register as a farmer. So I think that there is need for some primary study and I would suggest that probably that is something that the Ministry is probably actively looking at, but I cannot speak for them.

Dr. Henry: I just wanted to get an idea as to what proportion you might be serving, you know, if you think you reach in the 10 per cent, 15 per cent, you know, it does not have to be exact. But I will leave it there based on your comments, Mr. Chairman. I was looking at the internal audit numbers and you mentioned you were introducing technology and so on. There are a lot of discrepancies in terms of what things, small amounts of money, but money nevertheless that went awry. How are you trying to address these issues?

Mr. Ramdeen: Can you give a specific—?

Dr. Henry: In one instance, an estate constable collected the funds when he was not authorized to do so. It should have been the manager. Things like that, how are you addressing issues?

Mr. Ramdeen: Lincoln. Remind them who you are.

Mr. Parmasar: Lincoln Parmasar, Manager of Finance and Administration. Good morning, Chairman, members. Obviously that really speaks to the diligence in following the procedures and complying. So there is a greater emphasis now on ensuring persons comply with whatever rules are in place and supervision of what is done.

Dr. Henry: I made the point that the CEO had mentioned about technology and so on. Are you having problems using LINX and credit card payments or whatever else to help address these issues?

Mr. Parmasar: No, well, certainly now all employees are paid their salaries and wages via direct bank transfers. So we would have eliminated the risk that may have existed, say with payment by cheque or paying directly to the employee. So we are using technology, we are also enhancing the computer systems that we have in terms of processing transactions.

We are also, if I may add, as the CEO would have mentioned, for example, we have computerized the collection of revenue at the Northern Wholesale Market and that is to be rolled out to the other markets. That will strengthen our ability to collect revenue and account for that

revenue. So again, we are applying technology there.

Mrs. Webster-Roy: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Through you to the PS. I am going back to the discussion on the database and the number of farmers we have in Trinidad and Tobago. I am aware that when you register to become a farmer you are supposed to be assigned an Extension Officer. NAMDEVCO would have indicated that they have their technical officers who would frequently monitor their 2,300 farmers that are registered with them and are working with them. What is the Ministry doing to ensure that their extension officers are actually on the field getting the information so that your data could be correct and up-to-date? How many Extension Officers do you have and how are they assigned in terms of regions and so on, please?

Ms. Jacobs: Well, the Extension Officers are assigned by basis of their counties. But, you see, unless we are digital the information will always be subject to correction. And that is why the information has to be—because we have information, Land Management Division has information, the county division, they have some information, all the information that is in the county is not in the Land Management Division. So, that is our focus right now, to merge this and then to link with our stakeholders so that we can produce accurate information. So any numbers I can give, they are not really—I cannot give you accurate data at this point in time. So the issue has to be, moving forward, how do we correct these anomalies that exist and be able therefore to produce real-time and accurate data?

Mrs. Webster-Roy: Okay. So take into consideration the farmers that you should be aware of now, how is the information collected? NAMDEVCO would have indicated that there is real time so when the technical officer goes to the field, I do not know, is it by a tablet they would input the information and then come back to the officer? What is done with our Extension Officers? How do they operate to ensure that if they say that they are going to X, Y, Z farmer, they actually went and information is brought back to the Ministry in a timely basis so we could actually track and monitor what is happening.

Ms. Jacobs: Okay. Well, that is an issue at the divisional levels where the—that will be the process at the divisions where they will monitor their members as they go out. But I cannot tell you the exact mechanism, but I do know it is manual in nature. It is not tablet oriented.

Mrs. Webster-Roy: You noted that the Ministry would be looking to collaborate with the

different stakeholders to bring the information up-to-date and ensure that there is a level of predictability in terms of what is happening. How far is the process? What is the plan? Are you planning to have a standardized form in terms of how the data is collected? Is it going to be a central registry where the information is sent monthly by the different agencies, what is the plan?

Ms. Jacobs: Well, this—the first initiative, the first meeting took place last year. I came into the Ministry in June. So around August, as I said, we would have met all the stakeholders to first of all determine what do we have on the ground and therefore how do we move forward. I can say none are compatible right now. That is what I can say. So in moving forward as I said, even at the Ministry level we have different systems. So, land management, then I go out to the counties, so first of all it is really how are we—we are looking at, we have formed a committee to look at, first of all what do we have? We have already determined who will own the system and so moving forward we will determine—we have not reached very far as I said, it just started, because we needed to look at how can we provide accurate information and how can we communicate with each other, being in the same business and serving more or less the same clientele.

Mrs. Webster-Roy: Okay. And this question is for NAMDEVCO. I noted when you were doing the presentation, I think it was the opening statement, you would have noted that they would have introduced a system where the vendors and the prepayment—and I am thinking that would have been done to improve a particular process. What else has been done in terms of technology to improve processes at NAMDEVCO and to ensure that there is a better customer service, as well as a better client relationship with the organization and the farmers?

Mrs. Debysingh-Persad: So quite a few ICT technologies we would have introduced. One, is an SMS system that can give real-time and very quick pricing of approximately 46 commodities. You can SMS the message and it comes right back. We have an android and IOS app that can be downloaded on your phone that can be used to give prices of agricultural commodities. It is an app so it is very live, it is active. It gives real-time information. We have, of course, our electronic mail system; we have a direct hotline to what we call a “buyers and sellers desk”. We understand the challenges of waiting on information so we have a hotline that once you access it you can get real-time information on what you want to buy or what you want to sell. So we offer that service

as well, and of course through our websites, our Facebook pages.

In as much as we collect information we disseminate information as well. So, for example, even if there is a farmer who has 10,000 pounds of tomatoes and he may choose to tell us, “NAMDEVCO, I need a sale for it but I do not want a local sale for it, please assist me with either a regional or international sale”. We have those capabilities. So we link the farmer to the market. We may have the opposite where we may have a buyer who is interested in purchasing a 20-foot container of pumpkins holding approximately 25,000 pounds, we can connect you. In the event of, we also have the packing house facility that is au courant with all of the packing guidelines and food safety protocols for each of the importing countries. They can pack your product according to those country’s specifications and meet the SPS requirements for export.

Mr. Obika: Thanks Chair. Question again for NAMDEVCO, a follow-up to MP Webster-Roy’s question, regarding the foreign exchange issue. So, if a farmer gets a foreign sale, is the foreign exchange remitted to the farmer or they are paid in TT via NAMDEVCO? Let me re-ask the question. Do you connect the farmer directly to the buyer or does the farmer access the buyer via NAMDEVCO? So does the flow of funds go through NAMDEVCO or it goes directly buyer to seller?

Mrs. Debysingh-Persad: No. NAMDEVCO facilitates bridging that gap between the buyer and the seller. Prices and exchange of funds are nowhere in our business transactions. We are totally facilitative of getting the buyer and the seller to come to a meeting point. They arrange their prices, they arrange how moneys will be exchanged. We do not get involved.

Mr. Obika: I have a question regarding the legislation, because if I go through the legislation I see Trinidad and Tobago referenced together. It is not referenced as Trinidad alone. So I find it strange that NAMDEVCO would be saying that they are restricted to the Island of Trinidad.

Mrs. Debysingh-Persad: If I may, previously we did have a representative in Tobago. We have continuously done collaborative works with THA in terms of training seminars and even assisting some of their farmers through indirect linkages to find markets. But we are right now attempting to get back a NAMDEVCO’s presence in Tobago to facilitate marketing of what is grown and processed in Tobago.

Mr. Ramdeen: Since I was the one that said it, I just want to clarify. There is no restriction legally,

but we have no actual facilities in Tobago. So, sorry if I misled that it was only—Camille, you want to clarify any—

Mrs. Mohan-Cayenne: No.

Mr. Ramdeen: No, you good?

Mrs. Webster-Roy: Based on something you would have said, NAMDEVCO wanting to establish a presence to facilitate marketing, et cetera, how would that align with the Tobago House of Assembly, the division that is responsible for farmers and marketing? What is the collaboration, what is happening there?

Mr. Ramdeen: We have a member, we have Tobagonian on the board but I want to pass that to our Corp Secretary in terms of the legalese.

Mrs. Mohan-Cayenne: If I may, the board would have previously discussed getting into a collaborative relationship with Tobago through the division of agriculture, because it is understood that the equivalent Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries department is the Division of Agriculture. So currently we have on the membership, in the board, a member of the division, he is a fisheries officer and the work is being done through him to set up those meetings. But we are at a preliminary stage right now.

Mr. Chairman: Do you all have any follow-up questions?

Member: Different questions.

Mr. Chairman: You have different questions, okay. How many farmers do you have in Tobago?

Mrs. Debysingh-Persad: Chair, at this point in time I cannot quantify.

Mr. Chairman: You do not know?

Mrs. Debysingh-Persad: No.

Mr. Chairman: You do not even have a ballpark figure, 100, 50, 200, whatever?

Mrs. Debysingh-Persad: No, not at this time, I cannot tell. We would have had previous figures but my memory does not serve me right now on those previous figures.

Mr. Chairman: All right. Secondly, what is happening in terms of your ICT strategy for development? You mentioned three different things that you have, but I mean, clearly from what we can see here there is a need to integrate the farmers in the system, the quantity of land, the products they produce, to have an overarching view of what is possible in one place and also to

link that between—to have a link between supply and demand. So when you pull together all of this information which gives you a sense of supply, let us say, over time in a 12-month period you will be able to know how much of each crop you have coming up, et cetera, and you link that to demand whether local or international or both. You will be able to organize things a lot better, a little differently, significantly more effectively and efficiently. When are we going to—do we have any plan like that and are we going to get there?

Mrs. Debysingh-Persad: We do have a plan like that except our plan, also with respect to ICT is also to be used as an information portal with respect to diagnosing and being able to identify and treat with diseases on the field before they reach a stage where it cannot be controlled. So the ICT platform that is being developed to provide information to the stakeholders, be it internally or externally, it is also being developed to help the farmer to help himself through the need to diagnose diseases and to be able to identify diseases on the field. So it is really a real time platform. With respect to marketing and market development which is what that information will be used for, who is growing what, when it will be available, what they plan to grow in the near future, we are building a platform right now, I should not say right now—

Mr. Chairman: What I am interested in, is there a time horizon for an integrated system like that?

Mrs. Debysingh-Persad: No. We have started initial talks on developing that type of database, but if I may Chair, I would like to pass the question to the ICT manager so he can give us some more information on what is exactly being planned to put this information together to be able to disseminate it to the users.

Mr. Chairman: Okay, that is fine. And I would like the ICT person to speak but, is it a he or a she?

Mrs. Debysingh-Persad: He, Mr. Ragbir.

Mr. Chairman: Right. I would like him to speak to the issue of, what is the ultimate objective that you are seeking in integration? And how long will it take to deliver that? I do not want a whole operational plan on what you are going to do. I just want those two things. What is it you are trying to achieve in your integrated system and how long will it take you?

Mr. Ragbir: Thank you, Chair. Just for information, in terms of the NAMIS system which is the National Agriculture Market Information System, it is a holistic system built with the capability to

have all the farmers in Trinidad and Tobago into that system. In terms of the data that needs to be collected, in terms of the farmer, his static information together with his production data, that infrastructure is already available at the corporation in the form of NAMIS. Our challenge, Mr. Chairman, is really the number of bodies that is required in order to collect data for the entire country in order to get it into the system. The NAMIS system has the data for the farmers collected with respect to the certified farms—

Mr. Chairman: That is the 2,800, right?

Mr. Ragbir: That is the 2,800. So, in term of technology it is just a matter of getting additional data, because the database was already constructed and it is available. And it is from that portal that all the data that is disseminated to all the current users which is the farmers, the agro-processors, the exporters, are being pulled from that particular system. The website that you need to look at is called, www.namistt.com. That is where you will see the pricing information being collated and disseminated to all the different stakeholders.

In terms of the production data that you are speaking about, the infrastructure in terms of us is available. That is already constructed. So I do not need to construct that a second time around.

Mr. Chairman: So you have all the IT infrastructure to achieve what you are seeking to achieve, but you do not have the resources or a plan with a timeline to people the database that you have?

Mr. Ragbir: That is correct.

Mr. Chairman: Okay. Well, you see, that is an important piece of clarification because I suspect it is also a resource issue that has led to the fact that you do not have audited accounts up-to-date. And we have a situation now in which there is really a lag time. I could ask the Auditor General about that a little bit. And I mean, do you have a resource problem in NAMDEVCO? It seems to me if you want to know about agriculture and you are dealing with the marketing—you know, Arthur Lewis said a long time ago, everything begins with the market, and if you are the marketing arm for the agricultural production system of Trinidad and Tobago and you do not have the data, you cannot market anything except the little bit of data that you have, really. And even the price formulation that you say for 46 items is determined only by the limited

database that you have of 2,800 people. And perhaps by going to the market and knowing what the market knows, et cetera, I do not know how helpful, ultimately, those things are unless you have that solid database that you can get all your information together and you know what you are doing. So that is why I am so concerned about this, you see? All right. And if you have the infrastructure which is what your IT person has said—what is your name, Sir?

Mr. Ragbir: Mr. Prakash Ragbir.

Mr. Chairman: Mr. Ragbir has said that he has the IT capability. It is important to put that data and to get the means which is really people and bodies and activity and systems in order to make sure that this database is filled with the correct information. And on the 2,800 that you have, you have all the data that I am asking about?—how much land they have, what they produce, how much they produce and so on, for the 2,800?

Mr. Ragbir: We would not have the total numbers of land that they own, but we will have the numbers of acreage that are under production. The Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries will normally have that land information in their land information system.

Mr. Chairman: Okay. Can I also ask a question on fisheries? How many fishermen do we have in Trinidad and Tobago, fisher-people?

Ms. Jacobs: Sorry, Chair, we do not have that information readily available.

Mr. Chairman: Okay. You see—

Ms. Jacobs: But it is available, but I did not walk with that.

Mr. Chairman: Okay, so you have the information but you just do not have it here. All right, well, that is a better answer. Could you provide that for us so that we know?

Ms. Jacobs: That would be registered fisherfolk, eh.

Mr. Chairman: Yes. Okay. So that takes me to the other question. Of the 13,000 farmers you claim we have, how many are registered farmers? Or is the 13,000, registered farmers? You see, there is a reason I am asking that question and the reason is this. I know that the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries has been asking recently, trying recently to get the registered farmers and to rationalize those who have state lands that they are either squatting on or have tenancy of, et cetera, in order to make some rationalization of this. But in my own constituency when farmers have gone up the difficulty has been that if they do not have—if they have been

on land, it does not matter how long, but they have no formal legal basis for being there, with the papers, they cannot be registered.

11.35 a.m.

And secondly, there are complications, even those who have state tenancy issues. So to me, this is a very important issue to determine whether or not we have a production base and what it is. I do not feel we could even attempt to address the question of how much we can produce of each item unless we regularize these issues. And then there are all kinds of problems with farmers, with people who have been there for years, other people coming and claiming parts of the land because they do not have title of ownership, et cetera. So this registration issue is important; how many registered farmers do we have.

Ms. Jacobs: Chair, I do not have that information at hand, but—

Mr. Chairman: Can you get it?

Ms. Jacobs: Yes, the registered farmers, yes. That is what—you can get that.

Mr. Chairman: We would like to know. Okay? Because those things, it seems to me, are important, or else we cannot have the production system that we have. You have a question? A follow-up? Yes. Follow-up questions from the Vice-Chair.

Mr. Obika: Thank you, Chair. Now, a cursory search on the Internet will give you options for big data, some of which are very expensive, some of which are inexpensive, and the ones that are self-populating might be more relevant in terms of a cost-effective approach, all right?—given your subvention is not grand. Now, what I would like to ask from NAMDEVCO, given that you all are on the field as opposed to persons from the Ministry who have to survey everything, if you all can commit to suggesting which applications might be of value. For instance, WASA has an app where you can geo-position where there is a leak, and those types of things. At least that is the idea. Whether it works for WASA is a different scenario, but we will get there as a country. Are there any things like that that you all may be looking at in NAMDEVCO?

Mrs. Debysingh-Persad: Yes, we will be looking at a system and we have initiated discussions where farmers can populate a database in terms of what they are growing and their expected yields. So that is one of the data-collection devices that we have had discussions about to be able to capture more data in a faster time frame. Of course, it will be subject to various audits,

verifications and monitoring programmes, but, yes, it is something that we have discussed in going forward.

Mr. Obika: Could you furnish this Committee with any—of course given the restrictions you may have with a line Ministry. But once there are no restrictions, could you furnish this Committee with propositions to that effect so we could understand better, in detail, what is at stake?

Mrs. Debysingh-Persad: Yes. Once we have completed with our ICT department the approach that we are going to use in terms of making sure that the information that has been put into that database is verifiable, we will be more than willing to share that process with you all. As I said, we have had initial discussions on it, because we recognize the need to get more information from what is happening in our farming communities.

As a marketing corporation we are bombarded with a host of different types of information that we need to disseminate, and we need to be in the know real time, because, you know, as I always say, fruits and vegetables are not going to stay on the trees for any extended period of time. Once they have reached that stage of physiological maturity, they need to be harvested and they need to go to market within a particular time frame to ensure that their post-harvest lives ensure a particular market value for the commodity. So we have to be quick with what we are doing, and that is why we are thinking about—and we have engaged discussions to get more information from the field to us.

Mr. Chairman: Okay. Sen. Seepersad?

Ms. Seepersad: Chairman, I just want to deal with the accounts; some information on the accounts. When I read it I realized you had some issues with the audited accounts up to 2011, and that there are some issues in terms of the balances not being reconciled, et cetera. And going forward, have you put things in place to address these issues so that the information produced in the subsequent accounts is something you can rely on?—and because it is also a tool to manage. So you do not want to be relying on inaccurate information. If you could tell me about that, as well as, are there resources that you require that would add to your ability to produce accurate financial records? And do you have policies and procedures that would guide your people—your staff—in, when they do whatever they have to do in terms of the accounts and just general management of the corporation to ensure that your corporation is really

properly managed?

Mr. Parmasar: Yes, certainly we have addressed many of the differences, certainly the significant ones, such that the 2011 accounts, as you would see, we were able to get what is called an unqualified opinion, whereas in the previous year it was qualified. So we have addressed many—certainly of the significant issues, and going forward we will be able to have a balance sheet that can be relied upon more significantly. We all have to work with constrained resources in these times, so we are making do with what we have. Certainly, in terms of guidance of the staff, that is being done on an ongoing basis; in terms of even some aspect of training—in-house training that we do. So all of those are being handled internally.

Ms. Seepersad: Your policies and procedures, do you have those in place at this time now?

Mr. Parmasar: Yes, certainly we do. For the preparation of the accounts, for other processing of transactions within the department, we do have those and we review them on an ongoing basis and do make changes where we feel we need to enhance certain aspects of those processes and procedures. But we do have a base to work with.

Ms. Seepersad: And with respect to the accounts from 2012 to 2017, we noted that they were sent—they are in the process of being audited, I believe.

Mr. Parmasar: That is correct.

Ms. Seepersad: You are going to have those finished—do you have an idea when they would be finished?

Mr. Parmasar: Well, allow the Auditor to speak. I have some information, but I think it is best that they present that information.

Mr. Naipaul: Good morning again all. The status of the financial statements for 2012 financial year, it is at an advanced stage of review, so that it should be out shortly. However, the 2013, we are awaiting final signed financial statements from NAMDEVCO, because there were adjustments, as happened with previous years. 2014, the field work was completed recently and we have the quality control review process ongoing. The 2015 fieldwork, we expect to commence at the end of January 2019, and the fieldwork for financial years 2016 and 2017 will follow.

Ms. Seepersad: So if you could just give me an idea of when you think all this will be done.

Mr. Naipaul: Okay. By June, I would say, the fieldwork should be completed, and in between there we should have 2013—'12, '13 and '14 certified.

Ms. Seepersad: So you should be up to date by the end of this year.

Mr. Naipaul: I would say so. That is the aim.

Mr. Chairman: Up to date, meaning 2017?

Mr. Naipaul: Up to 2017, yes.

Mr. Chairman: Okay. Will you meet your March or April deadline for 2018 accounts?

Mr. Parmasar: Well, yes, Sir.

Mr. Chairman: You will?

Mr. Parmasar: We have them prepared but the issue is to have them audited, because we, as a board, decided to publish—if that is the issue—only those which have been audited and certified to be fair.

Mr. Chairman: Yes, okay. All right. But you will be on time with 2018?

Mr. Parmasar: Yes, it will be completed.

Mr. Henry: I have a couple of different strains of questions, but one of the things you mentioned was the ability to access the Canadian and American markets that you were working on. What is the articulation between yourself as NAMDEVCO and the Ministry?—because that is a very big task of trying to break into the US market. I am familiar with some of the problems of exporting almost anything, especially agricultural products to the US. How is that going? And how is that being handled? Because you seem to be severely resource-challenged. So how are you dealing with that?

Mrs. Debysingh-Persad: Okay. So I will give you the answer in two parts. I will do one and I will ask Mr. Alexander to do the other question on the Canadian market. With respect to the US market and with the advent of the Food Safety Modernization Act, it has specific requirements for the importer with respect to fresh fruits and vegetables. As a corporation, we are preparing our stakeholders to meet the requirements of the Act through rigorous training and through dissemination of information. The GAP Programme that we are about to embark on is also a part of it. It is a certification programme that certifies the produce safe for human consumption, and that is the broadest aspect of the GAP Programme.

So having said that, we are placing our exporters and our producers in a state of readiness for their products to be accepted into the US market. Previously, we would have facilitated many millions of pounds of produce shipped from NAMDEVCO's packing house into the US market and the Canadian market, but now, because of regulatory requirements and SPS issues, we have to abide with the requirements of the importing country. Mr. Alexander will provide you with another update on the Canadian market.

Mr. Alexander: Good morning again to everyone. The trip to Canada was a fact-finding. It was a trade mission to Canada, seeing that they have issues in production throughout the year. Generally, what we did was a review of the supermarkets to identify the types of fresh produce—tropical fresh produce—that they demand or they use due to their Caribbean diaspora there. Also we looked at creating linkages with the different importers or distributors in Canada. And this was backed up by focus on the different types of legislation or registration that is needed to enter the Canadian market. All this information which we collected now will then be disseminated to the local users or the exporters, even traded back to the farmers to create that direct system from what they require from the production stage straight to be able to enter the market. So the report was done, submitted to the board and a brief presentation which will begin the roll-out in terms of the know-how to export to Canada [*Interruption*]. Excuse? Yeah. The know-how to get to Canada and to familiarize them with the requirements of entry into the Canadian market.

Mr. Henry: You mentioned the SPS. I assume you mean Sanitary Phytosanitary measures. Could you give is a specific example of what are some of the problems that we are encountering—our produce is encountering in the Canadian market?

Mrs. Debysingh-Persad: Of course, all products that are exported are required to have plant quarantine certificates—to be inspected by plant quarantine. Some of the major issues—we have not had any reported major issues thus far, from NAMDEVCO's information, that is. But you are speaking specifically in terms of?

Mr. Henry: For example, is there a particular problem with our sweet potato or carrot, whatever we produce? What is the exact problem that could fall under sanitary or phytosanitary?

Mrs. Debysingh-Persad: So right now there are particular commodities that are in demand.

Again, we have seen commodities like hot peppers, dasheen leaves, melongenes, a few others. These are the demand commodities that are competitive on the international markets. So, of course, we pay attention to the SPS issues, but other commodities, they do not create as much of as a demand in the market. So for example, yes, we have the issue with the silas with the sweet potatoes and we are trying to manage that.

Mr. Henry: Could you explain that to the public?

Mrs. Debysingh-Persad: How we have managed—

Mr. Henry: The sweet potato problem.

Mrs. Debysingh-Persad:—the sweet potato problem. I would like to take that question to the Ministry as the technical team that is dealing with the silas.

Ms. Jacobs: Chair, the sweet potatoes, there is a problem as far as I know with a weevil. But, as far as I am aware, that is being managed through the training division, the extension services division, the agricultural services division and the research division. So they are working directly with the farmers under their purview to address the concerns of the sweet potato. In terms of its marketing, I cannot answer that, but I know at the Ministry level, that matter is being addressed by training and education of the farmers.

Mr. Obika: A follow-up regarding marketing, because I turn to the organizational chart of NAMDEVCO and practically, except for the position of manager, Market Facilitation, every other position that has the word “marketing” in it is vacant. And this is: Marketing and Agricultural Development Services—vacant; Market Development, LRI—vacant; Agribusiness Development—vacant; Market Research and Product Development—vacant. Could we get some answers on that? Because if the challenge is to get into the external market and practically all the marketing officers are not on post, how do we owe resolve that?

Mr. Ramdeen: We are currently finalizing our “strat” plan and included in that are filling many of those vacancies that you have identified. The only other thing I would want to point out, that there are positions that do not have the term “marketing” in it, but they are essentially providing a marketing function. So for example, the farmers’ market initiative whose acting manager is here with us today, Christopher, every week from Point Fortin to Diego Martin we have nine opportunities for farmers to come and sell directly to consumers, and that distribution point is

critical to their ability to bring their goods to market. So that while—I would say that our entire operation is a marketing operation and that, yes, some of those positions where we need to beef up our specific areas in terms of roles, that those are being addressed as we speak within the context of the challenges of the budgets and that kind of thing.

Mr. Obika: So, Chairman, is it that you have challenges getting funding? That is why these positions are not filled, notwithstanding the statement regarding the “strat” plan which is imminent?

Mr. Ramdeen: No, I would not blame it on the funding. I would not blame it on the funding. I think we get now something to the order of \$30 million subvention and then we have our own funding as well, in terms of fees that provide.

Mr. Obika: I just wanted to—as you are on the point of subvention I wanted to ask a question regarding the marketing in terms of, is there a plan? Notwithstanding the “strat” plan session which is imminent, is there a plan to generate additional income?—because apart from the subvention, you generate about \$3 million to \$5 million annually from your other sources. Is there any plan to generate additional income from international marketing efforts?

Mr. Ramdeen: All right.

Mr. Obika: Or that would be captured by the subvention?

Mr. Ramdeen: Right, okay. So, just going back to the filling of the positions question, and then I will come to that. There was a hold put on the filling of positions. I would imagine that was 18 months ago or so?

Mrs. Mohan-Cayenne: Yes.

Mr. Ramdeen: So that would have slowed us down, and that was a direct relation to funds that are available to pay people’s salaries and that kind of thing. Where we see ourselves raising some of our own funds, apart from the current means which are fees from the public and fees from farmers and fees from people who are at our various facilities, would be through the potential of the packing houses, and that is why it is a priority for us to get our packing houses that PPP—the Public Private Partnership Programme—going, so that we could potentially get some revenue from that. But it is tough.

Mr. Chairman: Is it possible for you to become financially viable on your own without subsidies

or with reduced subsidies? I mean, do you have a plan for that?

Mr. Ramdeen: No, I am not seeing that. I think from where I sit, NAMDEVCO is set up to—really to facilitate and to enable and to some degree there is a subsidy to the farming community by providing markets that cost a lot more to run than fees could ever pay for.

Mr. Chairman: Right.

Mr. Ramdeen: I mean, if we just look at even the farmers' markets that we run, you have to put up a tent; you have to buy tables; you have to have toilets; you have to have cleaning, and by and large I do not believe we charge farmers at this stage. So they have a facility. So it is really serving the farming community, so that if we were to become viable, then it would be something that the farmers ultimately would have to pay for and the public would have to share.

Mr. Chairman: Okay. You know, you talk about export markets, but, you know, tourism is an export product. I mean, although tourists come to your shores, it really is an export product. And to the extent that you are able to convert locally produced food into cuisine that is then available to tourists, et cetera, that is a significant market for local produce. And I am not thinking only about the Trinidad and Tobago market where tourism is not strong, but I am thinking about the regional market as well. Is there any connectivity at all between what NAMDEVCO does and the regional tourism market?

Mr. Ramdeen: I do not believe that we have a deliberate plan. There probably are some spin-offs but I do not know that it is something that we are focused on.

Mr. Chairman: Is that something you can look at, starting at home?

Mr. Ramdeen: The only thing—I would want to be realistic, Chair. We have our own demons to fight in terms of running markets; in terms of expanding our farmers' markets; in terms of being of better service to our farmers through our own extension officers; in terms of getting the data going. So, I mean, we can add 25 more things to the list, but would we really do a good job? No.

Mr. Chairman: Okay. And in addition you are under-resourced both in the financial sector as well of other areas.

Mr. Ramdeen: I would think the country is getting fairly good value for money in terms of what it cost to have NAMDEVCO—

Mr. Chairman: No, no, but you are under-resourced in terms of the personnel that you have to

keep your operations going. Right?

Mr. Ramdeen: Well, I am agreeing with you in a roundabout way. *[Laughter]* That is not to say that—

Mr. Chairman: You are giving as much value as you can under the circumstance.

Mr. Ramdeen: Well, that is not to say that we cannot improve. We definitely can improve. We can improve productivity; we can improve how much grey matter we put into any issue to do it better. So there are many, many opportunities.

Mr. Chairman: Okay. Sen. Henry, Sen. Seepersad. You wanted something too? Sen. Seepersad, go ahead.

Ms. Seepersad: Thank you. Just jumping off the point of resources and financial resources, I was looking at your receivables and prepayments. Do you have a debt-recovery policy?—because there is no point having receivables if you are not collecting them. I mean, that is just a waste of money that somebody else has and, you know, you really should be going aggressively after collecting your money.

Mr. Parmasar: Yes. Well, we do have systems and processes in place to pursue those debts, most of which were incurred many years ago. In fact, we have stopped having credit sales or the fees and so on, give credit for those, except for at the processing packing house for selected clients. So we are more or less on a cash basis. But we do have processes in place for follow-up to collect those that we do have on the books. We have also engaged a collection agency to pursue those which as problematic in terms of collection.

Ms. Seepersad: How successful are those efforts?

Mr. Parmasar: Well, we are collecting. It is not as good as we would like. We do collect small amounts. As I said, many of these are actually statute barred.

Ms. Seepersad: Okay.

Mr. Parmasar: So that it is a challenge in collecting, but we do collect small amounts as we go along.

Ms. Seepersad: Thanks.

Mrs. Webster-Roy: Actually, my question is on marketing in terms of there is a trend now where people are looking towards organic products and produce. Is there any system in place where

NAMDEVCO would usually, maybe separate or grade, even looking at the local farm-to-table initiative in terms of what is organic and what is not organic and finding markets for local organic produce—international markets, and that sort of thing?

Mrs. Debysingh-Persad: So, based on our Farm Certification and Monitoring Programme, produce on the farms are monitored for their safety component. Data is also collected. Technical visuals are done on the farm in terms of food safety. From the standpoint of organic, no, we are not in a position to identify foods as organic but we can verify, through the farms that we monitor, that the products are produced safe, through our technical dissemination of information, through the information that we collect. That is as much as we can do.

Mrs. Webster-Roy: So at no time should we see coming at your wholesale market somebody coming and saying, “certificated organic” based on—that should not happen, right?

Mrs. Debysingh-Persad: Certified by whom?

Mrs. Webster-Roy: NAMDEVCO.

Ms. Seepersad: No.

Mrs. Webster-Roy: That should not happen.

Ms. Seepersad: No. But you will be a NAMDEVCO certified farmer, but that certification programme is originally developed out of a trade protocol that was signed with Barbados. So it has its own requirements; it has its own affiliations in terms of certification. But in terms of organic, no.

Mr. Ramdeen: Chairman, just one clarification on your earlier point on any spillover to tourism. I am told that the higher end hotels like the Hyatt would regularly call NAMDEVCO to confirm that farmers that they are dealing with are certified, and that is to meet their own certification requirements. So we are playing a role there, but I did not want to overstate it.

Mr. Chairman: Yes, okay. No, no, I understand.

Mr. Obika: It is a question on the receivables. I am seeing that the 90 days-plus receivables, apart from the CMA heritage debt, you have \$2.36 million, but 67 per cent of that is one receivable, which is over 90 days. Is it that this receivable is being recovered, or going to be taken off the books? The second question—are you seeing the receivable I am talking about, or I need to mention the company?

Mr. Parmasar: *[Inaudible]*

Mr. Obika: Yeah. And the other issue I have is when you go through the receivables you are seeing a lot of receivables beyond 90 days that are less than even \$10. Many are below \$100, but there are even some below \$10, like 50 cents and that kind of thing. And also, I am seeing one for Hilo—I thought they had changed to Massy Stores—to \$4,500. And I want to know if Massy Stores recognizes this, or there is something else that explains that. So basically a cleaning up of the register; that is the question I am having there.

Mr. Parmasar: The particular customer that you are referring to, that matter is under legal proceedings, so that is being dealt with. The others there, the smaller ones, some of them may be a residual after amounts have been paid or credit notes have been issued. But we are undertaking a clean-up exercise as we go along. Some of those have been removed already, and the process is ongoing.

12.05 p.m.

Dr. Henry: Okay. Back to the question of export into foreign markets. You mentioned Canada and possibly the US. What about the European Union in terms of being a target for some of our exports? Because we went through a large negotiation process to pass an agreement with Europe, the Economic Partnership Agreement, which should have given us access to the European market and so on. Is there any effort in that direction?

Mrs. Debysingh-Persad: There used to be some very small trade into the European market, but there are many challenges into getting into that market, one of which is, of course, trade standards. For example, farmers have to be GLOBALG.A.P. and/or EUREPGAP certified. So that is one; and two, again there are logistics getting into those markets sometimes; three, the demand for the particular commodity. So there used to be a fair amount of trade into Europe. As of now, the trades are very, very minimal and these are some of the issues that are affecting the growth of that market.

Dr. Henry: Okay. My final question is in terms of your research. I do not get the feeling that you do a lot of research at NAMDEVCO because there is no manager of research or anything like that on the organizational chart, and if you are successful with your ICT platforms, and so on, you are going to collect a large amount of data that you disseminate. That is part of your function as you

stated, but who actually does the research in terms of looking at these data and analysing them? You just pass it over to the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries and say, “Okay, that is outside our portfolio?”

Mrs. Debysingh-Persad: So that will form part of our “strat” plan that is currently being developed, reviewed. We do have provisions for those types of functions to be filled.

Dr. Henry: Yes, because it is important to me because—given my other hat when I am not here, I am a research person, and I really would like to get behind some of what is going on in terms of our agricultural production. I mean, you should have a rich data set if you are successful.

Mrs. Debysingh-Persad: We do.

Dr. Henry: We need to put it to use.

Mrs. Debysingh-Persad: Yes. Agreed.

Mr. Obika: Just a comment I want to make, Chair. I think—I am getting the sense that the CEO has to do “too much” things in terms of the core function of the organization and would not be able to focus on her role and function as a CEO. The whole issue of having a marketing company without marketing experts is worrying, notwithstanding the fact that you have been prevented from hiring. So it may be no fault of the organizations, but given that they are going into a strategic planning session I think you should put some pressure, because to me it is reprehensible as a country. We have a marketing company and we do not have marketing experts resident there who would then be able to give the CEO the best in class information so then she could make her strategic decisions without having to worry about getting dirty in doing the actual marketing herself. So that is a comment I want to leave.

Mr. Chairman: Could I ask the members of the Auditor General’s team here if you would like to make any comment before we close?

Mr. Hernandez: Chair, the issue of the ICT systems thus raised, we have a similar situation which was raised in the public accounts in the last two years where you have Ministries’/Departments requiring the same data yet they all have different standalone systems. So this is a big issue where you have like four entities here requiring the same data for so many farmers. So they should meet together and collaborate to ensure that there is compatibility among the various systems.

Mr. Chairman: Okay. Anything else on the accounts in particular and the audit? I know you made a comment on that earlier.

Mr. Hernandez: The Auditor General has put systems in place to ensure that the accounts are brought up to date and we have teams working. So we expect to get the financial statements audited as we said by year's end, up to 2017.

Mr. Chairman: Okay. You want to say anything in relation to the Auditor General's comments? You are okay, Chair? All right. I want to thank all of you for being here today and for making this worthwhile meeting from the public point of view. I want to thank the representatives of the Auditor General's Department, the Permanent Secretary and the other members of the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries, the Chairman and the members of the board who are present and the CEO, and other officials from NAMDEVCO, the National Agricultural Marketing and Development Corporation, and members of the media for attending here today, and we hope that you disseminate this information to the public via the media.

I want to say that I think there is a general feeling in the citizenry and there is a general thrust in terms of Government pronouncements that agriculture is important, and I think the ultimate objective in agriculture is to produce as much as we can of the things that we can produce to reduce the import bill as significantly as we can and to produce more in order to export and bring in some foreign exchange so that we not only address the foreign exchange issue, and the import substitution issue, and the reduction of imports into the country, but that we actually are a viable agriculturally producing nation.

Most countries that are successful, I mean, start by taking the position that we must try and produce as much as we can to feed ourselves and then we look after other things, and given the information that we have about the farmers, the registration of farmers, the state of registration, the access to information by farmers, I find it a little troubling in the agricultural sector. We do not seem to have the information that is necessary to even know what we can do and I find that kind of troubling. I think NAMDEVCO is okay with its 2,800 farmers and—who are producing and linked to them, and who they are supporting, and the 500 farmers who are using the markets, but I think in terms of knowing what the potential is for production, I think we are far away from what is possible.

From the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries' point of view we will send to ask for the information on the registered farmers, and so on, so that we can have an idea of what really is the state of the agricultural sector, how many people are producing on their own land, how many people are producing on state lands as registered farmers, and how many people are not connected to the system at all because of various problems in the agricultural sector. Unless we can deal with these problems I do not see how we can go forward. The second issue is the marketing role of the organization in terms of managing supply and demand, and doing that effectively without the database and the information on the ability to manage these things. Related to that is the ICT issue where you actually have the system that can be populated with the data, but you do not have the resource issues which you have indicated is also an issue with the accounts which is why there is such tardiness and may be problems as well. So we look to the rectification of some of these issues.

I think you have to honestly speak to the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries, and the Minister, and tell him what resources are necessary for you to do your job. I do not see how you can do your job without personnel. I do not see how you could do your job without talent—I mean talent beyond yourselves because there are missing ingredients here. I do not see how you can do the marketing function effectively without marketing personnel. I know you yourself, Chairman, are a marketing person and that is valuable to have as chairman of the board, but I mean at the end of the day I am sure you have your own business to run and this is not a full time job for you. You are not an executive chairman and you need to have people who can work and deal with that particular function.

So I would mention those things as troubling for the organization. I hope that you will get all your accounts up to date and that we can have all of them audited and certified by the Auditor General by the end of 2019 which will bring you up to 2018, and I think that would stand you in good stead. But we thank you very much for your—I thought that you were very forthright and straightforward in your engagement of the Committee and we thank you very much for that. Thank you very much.

12.16 p.m.: *Meeting adjourned.*