

CAFF Conducts Training Workshop for Coconut Farmers in Savusavu



A team from the Fiji National University's (FNU) College of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry (CAFF) led by Dean Professor Paul Iji, recently conducted a 2-day training workshop for coconut farmers in Savusavu, the main hub of coconut production in Fiji.

The workshop, which was supported by the Pacific Community (SPC), Ministry of Agriculture, Waterways and Environment and Copra Millers Fiji, focussed on coconut mother palm selection and coconut harvesting techniques.

According to Professor Iji the workshop was timely and important given that these are key areas hampering coconut production and the growth of the associated copra and coconut oil industry in Fiji.

"Fijian coconut trees are largely senile and unimproved, therefore yield fewer fruits than those overseas and the fruits are not harvested when ready, which reduces the supply of mature fruits and copra to the millers," said Professor Iji.

The workshop was funded by Pacific Community and European Union and was led by CAFF's Department of Agribusiness and Extension, with support from the Department of Forestry. The project was co-led by Dr Salesh Kumar and Vijendra Kumar, supported by staff from CAFF's Department of Agribusiness and Extension, and the Department of Forestry.

"We had planned to accommodate about 30 farmers but the turnout was double this number, so we were really encouraged by the response. The presenters taught the farmers how to identify high-yielding mother palms, to select planting material from such trees; how to identify the male and female flowers and artificially pollinate the flowers, to increase yield," commented Prof Iji.

The farmers were taught how to use the mature fruit component

analysis to calculate the Mature fruit quality index, which should be the basis for selection of the mother palm.

"The trainers demonstrated various tree-climbing equipment and techniques, which are used overseas to improve the collection of fruits and ensure the safety of the collectors. Currently, most farmers in Fiji do not harvest the fruits when they are ready on the tree but wait for them to fall. This reduces the quality and supply of material for sale as well as prevent the collection of fruits at different stages of maturity. Poor harvesting is negatively affecting the operations of Copra Millers Fiji, which is currently running at only a small fraction of its installed capacity due to low volume and erratic supply of mature fruits and copra," said the Dean.

In his closing remarks at the workshop, the Dean of the College, Professor Paul Iji, called on farmers to regard their operations as a business venture, and follow the required operational techniques that they had learned to improve their income. He advised them to practice mixed-cropping as well as mixed-farming on new as well as old plantations.

"Since fruit tree production is a long-term project, it is necessary for farmers to secure their income pre- and post-maturity of the plantations. Annual and biennial crops such as cassava, dalo, maize and sweet potatoes can be planted in new plantations while pastures can be planted on mature plantations so that animals can be introduced. The latter practice can improve weed control, increase mineral supply to the soil and diversify the income of the farmer," Professor Iji informed workshop participants.

After the workshop, the FNU team toured the factory of Copra Millers Fiji and also discussed ways to improve production and efficiency. Both parties have shown a great interest in working together and a memorandum of understanding is being planned to be signed in the New Year to provide a framework for closer collaborations.