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## **SPS standards hampering international agricultural trade for Antigua & Barbuda**

**BY ONIKA CAMPBELL, Journalist**

**ST JOHNS, Antigua —Antigua & Barbuda continues to experience legislative, financial, infrastructural, and technical impediments as its ministry of agriculture moves toward the implementation of sanitary and phytosanitary (SPS) standards and regulations for the export of agricultural commodities.**

Under the World Trade Organisation (WTO) Agreement, SPS Standards deal with regulatory measures applied to protect human, animal and plant health. These agreements aim to harmonise SPS measures, such as control and inspection procedures, risk assessment methods and the safeguarding of facilities for food and agricultural products (raw, semi-processed and processed) in international trade or supply chain.

The current era of export agriculture in that twin-island state evolved in the 1980s as a reaction to the failed import substitution initiatives of previous decades. Those earlier years had been characterised by high protectionism; widespread production inefficiency; substantial state intervention in the agriculture sector; over-valued exchange rates and increased scarcity and rationing of foreign exchange.

The failure of import substitution agriculture in many developing countries led to new policy prescriptions by the international financial institutions (IFIs) in the form of market/trade liberalisation initiatives, which included exchange rate liberalisation, removal of tariff and non-tariff barriers and the removal of state institutions, such as marketing boards, among other measures.

In the 1995 Agreement on Agriculture (AoA) of the Uruguay Round of multilateral trade negotiations, emphasis was placed on liberalisation and increased market access. Binding and reducing tariffs, and the lowering of subsidies and other ineligible trade and the resultant

distorting of domestic support to agriculture, further advanced the process of liberalisation of the agriculture sector (UNCTAD, 2008).

With the advent of trade liberalisation and a proliferation of regulatory requirements for market access, governments and the private sector are now required to comply with stringent international standards and certification requirements. These have added to the already high and rising costs of producing and trading in agricultural commodities.

### **Problems meeting export requirements**

According to Plant Protection Officer Dr. Janil Gore–Francis, the country's inability to fully implement these international standards due to financial, legislative and other constraints is a hindrance to some extent, particularly in cases where these standards are upheld by important trading partners.

Oftentimes, these requirements are used as a barrier to hinder entry of imports that will compete with important domestic products, especially agricultural items. Gore-Francis has indicated that the main focus in Antigua & Barbuda is on the constraints that trade partners in developed nations impose on agricultural goods and on the prospects of reducing them in ongoing WTO negotiations. Reports suggest that significant progress has been made in overcoming these hurdles; however 21<sup>st</sup> century agricultural policy reforms are needed.

As a small island state, Antigua & Barbuda has a multiplicity of agencies that handle the coordination, review, adoption and adaptation of food safety standards through the active involvement of relevant stakeholders. However, inadequate public amenities, poor infrastructure, bureaucracy and lack of legislative and financial services have been predominant hindrances in certifying producers and farmers in internationally accepted standards such as Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Points (HACCP) and Good Agricultural Practice (GAP). Further, with little capacity to initiate training and capacity building in necessary areas, such as in ISO 22000 Food Safety Standards, trade has also been significantly hampered.

The country also currently grapples with adequate inspection of crops during active growth and agricultural commodities in warehouses and storage facilities prior to certification, the maintenance of Post-Entry Quarantine Stations and various laboratories for insects, fungi, viruses, bacteria, nematode and tissue cultures. Work is being conducted, however, in the area of pest surveillance in order to monitor the presence and spread of plant pests on quarantine or cautionary lists.

There are also concerns about the introduction of potentially harmful items through imports. Gore-Francis explained that the country's Plant Protection Unit deals with phytosanitary (plant health) matters only, while the Veterinary and Livestock Division, the Analytical Services Department and Central Board of Health together are responsible for issues relating to sanitary (animal-related) measures.

“We regulate what comes into the country through the conduct of pest risk assessments where necessary, so that science is relied on in the determination of what can and cannot enter. We

also follow, as far as possible, the International Standards on Phytosanitary Measures (ISPMs) and adhere to the principles of the WTO Agreement on Sanitary and Phytosanitary issues. Once these conditions are satisfied, then the unit will issue import permits stating the entry requirements,” Gore-Francis said.

In dealing specifically with phyto-sanitary measures, she indicated that the country offers a measure of protection to plant life by exercising caution in a fair and equitable way as guided by these various international standards.

All of this is done in a bid to facilitate trade while at the same time protecting plant life in the country. However, Gore-Francis confirmed that, “local legislation is outdated, limiting the Plant Protection Unit's capacity to function as optimally as it should”.

### **Seeking Alternative Strategies**

The proliferation of standards and trade regulations for export continues to pose a threat to local producers, who, due to the lack of infrastructure, are faced with obstacles in overcoming stringent SPS measures for commodities of interest.

Other factors impacting Antigua and Barbuda’s export capacity include consumer preference towards processed foods. Therefore, support systems, particularly those geared towards capacity building and post-harvesting handling, are critical to overcome the constraints.

The ministry has been taking action in key areas to address the situation. These include:

- identifying actual and/or potential supply capacities for specific categories of agricultural commodities;
- strengthening domestic facilities to meet requirements for standards, certification, and other market regulations; and
- alleviating market-related and technical obstacles, such as the lack of information and technical capacity.

These developments have prompted local authorities to seek out and develop alternative arrangements for promoting trade. For approximately two years, officials within the Ministries of Agriculture in Antigua & Barbuda and the United States Virgin Islands (USVI) have been in dialogue to negotiate requirements for trade between the two nations, elaborating on specific ways to mitigate the potentially negative effects of emerging trade measures on market access. Strengthened trade between the USVI as a Caribbean Community member and the Caribbean is essential to promote the economic development and diversification of the region and to improve the well-being of all citizens. The government has said that it recognises the special challenges and opportunities the country will face in the highly globalised economy of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, and is committed to working to advance the prosperity and economic security of the people by facilitating expanded trade with the region through improved market access.

In Antigua, several multi-stakeholder meetings with producers, importers, hoteliers and other regional bodies have been held to raise the awareness of market opportunities. The annual Agri-Fest in St Croix, one of the largest agricultural fairs in the Caribbean, provides an

opportunity for farmers and the marketing arm of the agriculture ministry to literally take local produce to market.

It also provides an important platform to interact with business associates and explore export niche market opportunities. Antigua & Barbuda has been a participant and prize winner in the St Croix Agri-Fest for the past 11 years. Over the last three consecutive years, farmer, 32-year old Twini Payne has participated in the competition, placing second and third in a field of other farmers from over fifteen countries.

“This type of exposure allow farmers like myself to understand international market trends, explore export opportunities and identify measures to make certification more affordable, developing partnerships with others producers, importers and exporters and consumer groups. In essence, building on a regional co-operation, which, to me, is the only way forward,” Payne said.

Also, according to one agriculture ministry spokesman, “The Ministry has recognised that markets for fresh agricultural products may provide opportunities for diversification and development. Therefore, promoting the production and exportation of these crops provide opportunities through specialisation in value-added products”.

Officials from both countries also continue to promote and foster closer trade ties through dialogue. A recent live simulcast discussion on February 20, 2013, among USVI officials from the Department of Agriculture in St Croix and the University of the Virgin Islands, along with officials from the Antigua & Barbuda Ministry of Agriculture and its affiliated marketing arm – The Central Marketing Corporation — was held in St Croix and Antigua & Barbuda, simultaneously.

That dialogue assessed critical issues with respect to agriculture trading regulations in the context of new and emerging trade requirements, increased use of sanitary and phytosanitary barriers, concerns of food safety, quality and security. These issues will impact opportunities for possible diversification into high-value products and expansion of niche marketing.

Director of Agriculture in Antigua & Barbuda Jediddiah Maxime admitted that the twin-island state faces a number of constraints in achieving export diversification and cost competitiveness of commodities, including lack of economies of scale and ad hoc production.

Articulating the thrust of the ministry, the director made specific mention of the agriculture incentives programme, training and capacity building, and improved post-harvest and storage facilities, as actions that would support, encourage and facilitate increased production and improved quality. Some farmers already have taken initiatives to ensure that food produced in Antigua & Barbuda, either for local consumption or export, adheres to GAP standards, by developing proper handling, storage and farm sanitation practices.

However, Payne said that there is legitimate concern about how to fully apply these practices, based on scientific credibility, which risk the exclusion of small farmers in small island developing states from increasingly competitive and globalised food markets.

Meanwhile, he suggested “it may be possible to identify win-win situations for synergy with the private sector”.

“Giving incentives and allowing for us to employ more sustainable production standards,” Payne noted.

He added that that serious work is also required in the pooling expertise to provide both technical advice on production processes and managerial advice on farm management, marketing and commercialisation.

### **Conclusion**

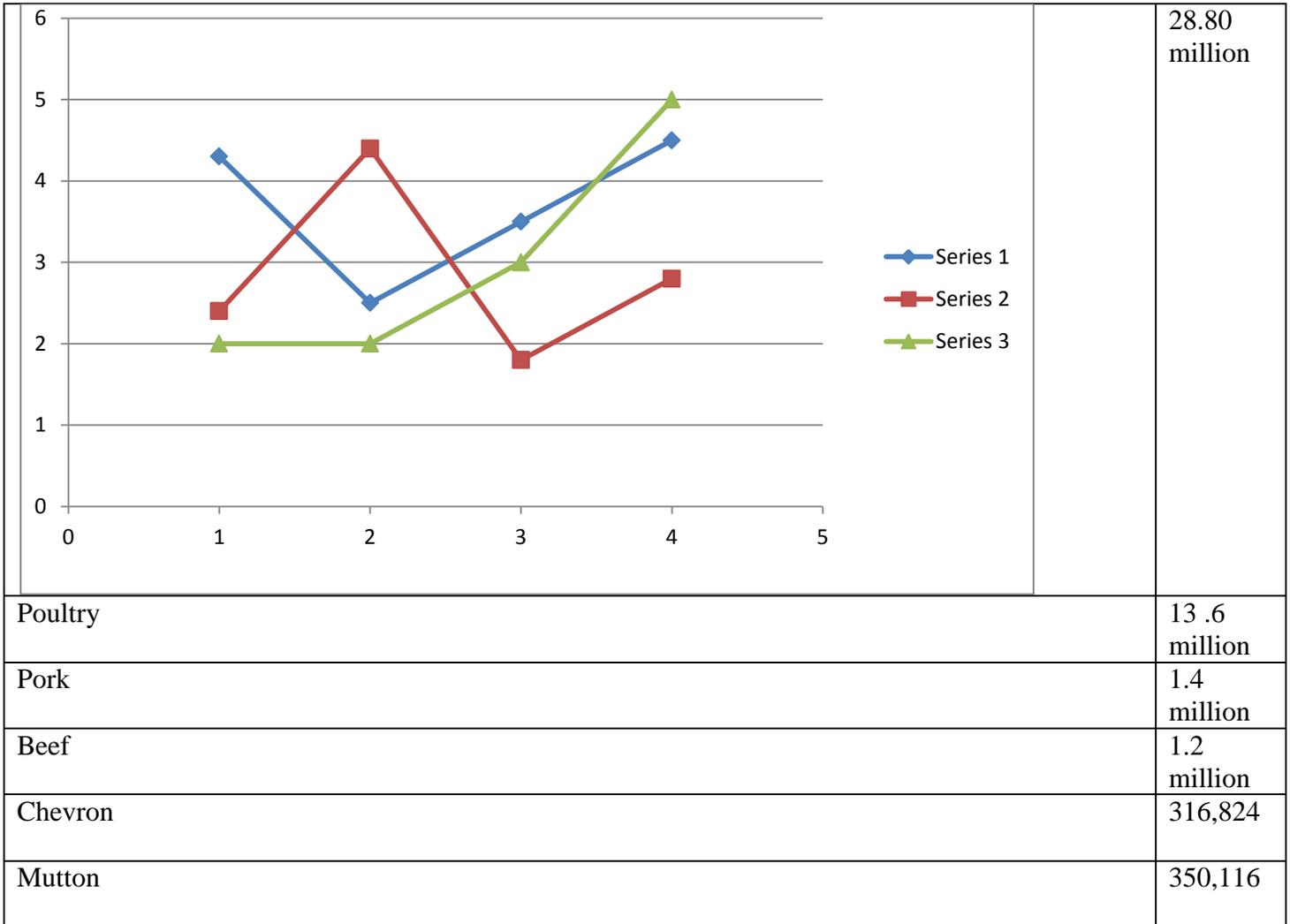
Additionally, the further development of GAPs as a technical and policy basis for food safety, environmental protection, economic and social equity, is an important way forward. It is critical that government agencies clearly define a process of decision-making for farmers based on the sequence of choices of GAP.

Risk analysis principles not only related to food safety, but also to environmental and social concerns is also a challenge and assistance is required at the farm level to develop appropriate protocols and processes that fit the local context, but with special focus to ensure that small and medium-sized farmers can participate in GAP-oriented markets, which are becoming and will continue to become a major focus of the global food export system.

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**SEE graphics below.**

Estimate Antigua and Barbuda Food Import Bill, Annually



Crop Sector Value as at 2010 was ECD 32.96 million. The fisheries sector on the other hand is valued at ECD 49.9 Million and contributes 50 –percent towards the agriculture Gross Domestic Product.

In terms of value added/ agro-processing, there are 35 registered agro processors, thirty of which are females which an overall value of the sector ECD 22.27million.

Source: Statistics Division, Ministry of Finance, the Economy and Public Administration

Date: 5 December, 2011

