

**National Address by Senator the Hon. Dr. James Fletcher,
Minister for the Public Service, Sustainable Development,
Energy, Science and Technology**



To mark the Observance of
United Nations World Water Day 2012
22nd March, 2012

The World is Thirsty because we are Hungry

Introduction

March 22nd, 2012 marks the United Nations' recognition of World Water Day. This year, the theme is "the world is thirsty because we are hungry".

This theme underscores the nexus between water and food security and serves to highlight the close relationship between water consumption and food production.

Global Overview

Currently there are an estimated 7 billion people on our planet, and our global population is expected to grow by an additional 2 billion people by the year 2050. On average, each person consumes 2 to 4 litres of water per day. This means that humans alone, without other animals or plants, consume 14-28 billion litres of water every day.

Although 70% of the earth's surface is covered by water and the substance appears abundant, the true picture lies in the volume of fresh water resources available. In reality, 97% of our entire planet's water is salt water, which means that only 3% is fresh water. Additionally, almost 70% of this 3% of fresh water is found in the icecaps of Antarctica and Greenland, where it remains locked up, frozen and virtually inaccessible to man.

If we discount other sources, such as the water that is contained in soil moisture and underground aquifers that we cannot access, it means that less than 1% of the World's fresh water supply is available for direct human use, and this comprises the water that is found in lakes, rivers, reservoirs and the underground sources that can be accessed at an affordable cost.

Agriculture is responsible for approximately 70% of the total water that is used worldwide. It takes 237 litres of water to produce 100 grams of oats, 2,400 litres

to produce 100 grams of chocolate, and 2,025 litres to produce 150 grams of meat. Clearly, our human diet is very water-intensive.

One third of the earth's population lives in areas that are experiencing water stress. Therefore, fresh water has already become a critical limiting factor for growth and development. Climate change and variability, which is one of the serious issues confronting Small Island Developing States like ours, is predicted to reduce even further the availability of fresh water resources in the Caribbean, maybe by as much as 30 percent. On top of that, our water supply continues to be threatened and compromised by pollution and contamination.

National Situation

Saint Lucia's National Population Census (2010) revealed that our country's population increased by 5% over the last decade. Saint Lucia's population moved from 157,775 in 2001 to 165,595 in 2010, and this increase was particularly significant in the district of Gros Islet in the north of the island. Additionally, there have been increases in tourist arrivals, and expansion of the construction and manufacturing sectors, all of which place significant demands on our water sector. In 2010, Hurricane Tomas demonstrated to us the fragility and vulnerability of our water sector. Our water utility company, WASCO, suffered serious damage to its infrastructure including: the John Compton Dam, the pumping stations, the water pipelines, water intakes and access roads. It is estimated that to get WASCO and its infrastructure back to pre-Tomas levels, which were already inadequate, will cost over \$30 million.

But it is not just excessive rainfall that has affected our water sector in the recent past. Prior to Hurricane Tomas, Saint Lucia suffered one of the worst water crises in history - the drought of 2009, which lasted for roughly eight (8) months. This

drought was the second major one in less than 10 years that our country had experienced, with the first occurring in 2001. The main water supply, the John Compton Dam that feeds the North and the City, along with most of the catchments and intakes, were severely depleted. In the light of this, the Government of Saint Lucia was forced to declare a Water-Related Emergency in order to conserve and ration the miniscule quantity of available water.

I am sure that you will recall how significant an impact this drought had on our Island's food security. Farmers who depended on the widely used rain-fed irrigation systems were severely affected, as there was little or no water to water their crop. The devastating effects were seen in the reduction of the quality and the decline in the quantity of most crops produced, particularly in banana production. Livestock were seriously affected, both by the shortage of water and the resulting decline in grazing areas. Consequently, the incomes of the farmers, their families and workers were significantly affected. This resulted in an increase in the prices of many food commodities, which in turn led to an erosion of customer purchasing power. Clearly, the 2009 drought painted a very sober picture of the need to make our country's water sector more resilient in order to sustain food production and healthy lifestyles.

The Way Forward

It is obvious, therefore, that we have serious work to do in our water sector. We cannot afford to carry on with business as usual in the light of our past, current and future water security challenges. We must put an effective, integrated and sustainable water management plan in place to improve our water security and lessen its impact on our food security.

It is urgent that we examine our water resources and the needs of the water and sewerage utility - WASCO. We must quantify our fresh water resources – if we do not know how much water we have, we cannot plan for how we should use it. We must also improve our wastewater management systems. Less than 5% of our households are connected to central sewerage systems, and the inability to properly manage wastewater and agricultural runoff is contributing to the deteriorating quality of surface and coastal water resources in our island.

We must ensure greater equity in the distribution of water – every community in Saint Lucia has a right to a regular supply of affordable, safe drinking water. We have to replace some of our old and inefficient water production and distribution systems. Additionally, we must improve the management and governance of the water sector.

There is a pressing need for all Saint Lucians to harvest rain water, in addition to having some minimum level of water storage, as advised by the Ministry of Housing after the passage of Hurricane Tomas in 2010. In the near future, our Government will be proposing a series of measures to encourage more efficient and effective rainwater harvesting. It is illogical that in a country such as ours, where water is such a precious and limited commodity, almost every household and commercial operation uses treated, drinking-quality water to flush toilets, irrigate gardens and clean their premises.

Our farmers and agriculture personnel must play their part in strengthening our water and food security by improving the efficiency of their water harvesting methods where these exist, and establishing water harvesting systems where there is none. The Ministry of Agriculture and Food Production must work with its farmers to improve the efficiency of the farm irrigation systems. Moreover, our

farming community should not release waste material, pesticides or animal effluent into our rivers and water sources.

WASCO must undertake a review of the engineering of the intakes and catchment areas to limit silting and clogging. The company must also look to restore those intakes that have been decommissioned but are still productive. Additionally, WASCO must continue its efforts to reduce losses at every point in our water supply system.

Our Government, the National Water and Sewerage Commission, the Water Resource Management Agency and WASCO must collaborate in comprehensive education and awareness drives in all sectors and communities, and in particular, in our school system.

Time for Action

The reform that is needed to bring our water supply up to an acceptable standard is attainable only if all the players - Government, regulator, utility company, private sector, civil society and households work together to achieve this common objective. Water is perhaps our most precious natural resource; we depend on it for our survival and our livelihood. We have spent a lot of time these last few years studying the sector and talking about it. It is now time for action.

This year's theme says "the world is thirsty because we are hungry". My Ministry is resolute in its commitment to working with all Saint Lucians to ensure that we make the necessary changes that will ensure that none of us is either hungry or thirsty because of an inability to get access to a regular, safe and affordable

supply of water. On this United Nations World Water Day, let us all individually and collectively commit to eradicating the practices that are detrimental to our water resources and implementing the measures that will secure our water supply for present and future generations of Saint Lucians. That is the essence of sustainable development.

I thank you.