



Ministry of Natural Resources, Local Government and the Environment

Reforms Initiatives Undertaken

**Prepared By:
Policy Unit
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The Ministry of Natural Resources, Local Government and the Environment over the past three years has embarked in a transformation process in order to achieve a highly competent, efficient and motivated Ministry which will be recognized for the quality of its service and performance.

The Ministry has as its main objective for this year the implementation of its plan to improve efficiency, transparency and accountability, increase the revenue collected by the Ministry, facilitate the making of informed decisions via the use of timely and accurate statistics and facilitate an enabling working environment for the benefit of the Ministry's employees.

Highlighted below are some of the processes/ projects implemented or in progress within the Ministry to accomplish the above objectives.

Administration

Job descriptions for the entire Ministry was revised and is continuously updated in an effort to streamline job responsibility as well as to better coordinate the activities in each Department. As a result of this, it is being recommended that staff within a Department be identified and deployed on a temporary basis to assist in other areas whenever the work load of that area supersedes its staff capabilities.

The Ministry is in the process of appointing or recommending promotion of staff who has been acting in a post and who meet the required qualification. The Ministry is also actively seeking to fill crucial vacant posts in order to ensure the continued efficiency of the affected department.

The Ministry with its reduced transportation fleet will implement a close monitoring of its motor vehicle pool in an effort to ensure the execution of required field work without delays.

The Reception Lobby was remodeled to better serve the public and to have controlled access to the Ministry's main building. All incoming calls are being answered by the receptionist and directed to the appropriate personnel as well as guiding visitors to the appropriate sections located in the main building. A display corner is being designed to provide information to the public.

An integral part of each department's capacity building is the short term and long term training/courses which are being actively pursued. Emphasis is placed on training that is

consistent with the successional plan of each department. Presently the Forest, Meteorology, Land and Surveys and the Environment departments have personnel undergoing training abroad. The IT Unit is keeping up-to-date with computer programming and access to online training.

Lands and Surveys Department

The Lands and Surveys Department (LSD), comprising of six sections, namely the National Estate, Land Registry, Valuation, Land Information Center, Physical Planning and Surveys and Mapping and six District Offices, has faced the most challenges to fulfill its objectives.

Over the past three years, the Lands and Survey Department, with primary assistance from the Land Management Programme (LMP), has improved its communications networking system, enabling applications processes to be executed more efficiently.

Title certificates are being issued at the completion of the LMP's surveys and adjudication activities. Under this new system, old deeds, conveyances and other land documents are converted into a single title document that offers a more secure record system, is efficient and is affordable. A total of 24,000 parcels of commercial, house, rural and agricultural parcel of lands will be officially surveyed in the Corozal, Orange Walk and Belize Districts. Also approximately 21,000 urban parcels will be mapped using aerial photography in Belize City, Orange Walk, San Ignacio and Dangriga towns and declared as registered areas.

The LMP is also looking at the expansion of the Land Administration Services by upgrading and strengthening it to a Land Information System (LIS) at the Land Information Center. All departments will therefore be connected and have access to timely and accurate statistics to facilitate in the decision making. Timely retrieval of information will also provide efficient services to the public.

The computerized valuation records are being reconciled enabling staff immediate access to lands records thus shortening documents processing time.

The LMP's land use planning and development review consultancy component has produced several manuals. Two of these manuals will assist in improving public sector capacity to plan for, review and monitor land use changes, including development proposals through the development of a decentralized national land use planning framework. The preparation of local land use plans has been completed and the delineation of some village boundaries in Toledo is planned in the coming year.

In respect to national policy and institutional reform, the 14 member National Land Advisory Committee (NLAC) appointed in 2003 is active. As a result of districts and national workshops, policy recommendations on land allocation and land acquisition are now made to the Minister. This ensures that all stakeholders have an input in the decision making.

The development of a communication strategy and preparation of operating manuals for the Lands and Survey Department (LSD) will be undertaken by a consultant under the stewardship of the Policy Unit in the Ministry. The Policy Unit has commenced the dissemination of information with the publication of the LSD Information Booklet, now in its second edition.

The National Estate Section developed its Procedures and Guidelines (draft) for processing land applications. A tracking system to monitor applications submission was also implemented thus reducing the processing period from six months to three to four weeks.

Under the Physical Planning Section a Planning Bill is in its draft form to address shortcomings in areas such as enforcements and penalties. Also this Section has identified revenue potential in the following services provided free of cost: application for subdivision, copies of approval letters and map compilation. There has been an improved rate of collection of annual renewal licenses as well.

Through the use of Auto Cad, upgraded to 2006, a computer aided design application software and a Design Jet 1050 plotter, the Survey and Mapping Section has been able to produce plans, cadastral maps, mutations and many other services in less than 30 days. The manual drawing of maps, a time consuming activity, is now only used to supplement what cannot be accomplished with Auto Cad.

The Lands and Survey Department, Valuation Section, has revamped its validating and/or assessment prices for sale of private land. The administration monitors very closely the sale price reported when levying taxes on land sold. Transactions that are suspect of undervalued reporting are flagged for further field verification for proper value assessment. With this in place stamp duty collection has increased by 57% in the past 3 years.

In keeping with Government's commitment to secure land for Belizeans, the Ministry of Natural Resources, Local Government and the Environment, through the Lands and Surveys Department has implemented the **Lease to Title Project**, a national initiative to convert leases to property. Residential leases of one acre or less are being targeted.

This project allows leaseholders to submit applications for the subsequent purchasing of their land. As part of the program, the Lands and Surveys Department will waive some specific requirements, particularly the leasehold agreement for development on the land. Once applicants have met all requirements and made payment for purchase, an official Land Title will be issued within one month.

Information and Technology Unit

The Ministry recognizes that technology and communication plays an important role in the way it will do its business hence it launched its computer network system in 2003, to facilitates, among other things, inter-departmental communication via electronic mail thus eliminating delays. The IT Unit is constantly servicing and modifying this system for efficiency.

The IT Unit has developed several stand-alone applications software. These are management tools developed to enhance service delivery and accountability within the Ministry.

1. Land Acquisition Management System (LAMS): A system designed to aid in the process of the acquisition of lands by GOB. The calculation of balance owing to land owners is now automatically calculated with a click of a button something that at times would take months to reconcile.
2. Fuel Consumption Data Base System (FCDBS): A management tool designed to keep track of all vehicle fuel consumption. This tool has the ability to provide instant reports sorted by single fields of interest or by multiple fields such as sorting by driver or vehicle.
3. Land Title Indexing System: The Titles Unit is now populating the data base of the Land Title Indexing System. This computerized index is allowing rapid search of land title documents, a procedure that is cumbersome using the present manual indexing system.
4. Vacation Leave System: This management tool manages, among other things, the process of the calculation of staff leave within the Ministry. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs has looked at this system for possible implementation.
5. The IT Unit continues to upgrade the existing Land Administration System, in particular the Land Revenue Sub-system to reflect accurately the information in each individual accounts ledger and official computer generated receipts issued. This system is also available in the districts; hence personnel have "live" access to land information and can input data related to the particular client's transaction. The integrity of the system is safeguarded by allowing only a senior supervisor at head office to edit or void data inputs.

Accounts - Revenue Collection

The Revenue Collection section plays a vital role in the revenue collection process. Its efficiency has increased by on the job training as well as by attending the Revenue Collections Workshop conducted by Senior Management and the Policy Unit. Both head quarters and districts revenue collection officers attended this workshop. The workshop addressed the following topics: Revenue Collection Guidelines and Procedures, familiarization of the Land Revenue Sub-system and Public Relations.

This section is developing a standardized Internal Revenue Collection Form (IRCF). This user-friendly form once properly filled by the section providing the service will enable the Revenue collectors to properly record and post the kind of service the client is paying for.

For transparency purposes, a compilation of all the standardized revenue collections fees is being done and will be visibly posted at each revenue collection points at head quarter and the districts.

To provide a speedy service to clients, a system is in place whereby a second revenue collector will be posted whenever there are three clients waiting in line.

Geology and Petroleum Department

The realignment of the Department's administrative responsibility of the Petroleum Sector and the Mining Sector under two separate individual geologist personnel has resulted in increased efficiency and service to clients by the timely processing of applications and issuing of mining permits and increased monitoring of all mining activities in Belize and revenue collection.

The recent discovery of petroleum in Belize by Belize Natural Energy Ltd. (BNE) has triggered an aggressive interest in Belize by petroleum exploration companies. This has increased the work load of the Geology and Petroleum Department; hence the Ministry submitted to and approved by Cabinet; a **Proposal for the Development of the Petroleum Sector of Belize**. In this proposal, the Ministry sought to strengthen the Geology and Petroleum Department as well as seek technical and legal expert advice. The proposal also called for the appointment of a Petroleum Advisory Board who will provide advice and make recommendations on petroleum matters and in particular make recommendations on how best to manage the revenue generated from petroleum to maximize benefits for Belizeans which is consistent with growth of the economy, environmental standard required by law, and public fiscal stability and transparency.

National Meteorological Service

The purpose of the National Meteorological Service is to provide hydrological and meteorological information and warnings to safeguard life and property and to promote the socio-economic development of Belize. To fulfill these objectives, the NMS saw the need and implemented a National Meteorological Service Succession Plan 2005 - 2015 to safeguard the department's succession of retired personnel with qualified personnel.

In order for its services to be relevant and efficient in an ever rapidly changing technology and increased public demand, the NMS had the foresight to replace its old radar systems installed in 1973 used in weather monitoring with a modern one. Because of its high capital

investment, the acquisition process was started several years ago and will be completed by early 2007.

In addition the recent upgrading of its office complex not only provides a safe environment but also uplifted staff moral.

Forest Department

The Forest Department's new dynamism generated by a young generation staff members introduces a new-knowledge base, and is constantly upgrading their technical knowledge base with support of a wide local and international alliance. In 2004, the Forest Department made the decision to examine strategic initiatives that would chart a new future course for the department. It was recognized that what worked before was no longer applicable to the newer challenges of the future, and that continuing with the present models, would only lead to the demise of the department. This resulted in a paradigm shift which is reflected in the department's published Strategic Plan 2005 - 2010 against which the department's level of success will be measured.

The overall goal of the Forest Department for the next five years is to have in place a regulated, efficiently facilitated, integrated and sustained management program for the forest resources in such a manner that these resources are recognized for their ecological functions as well as for their contributions to the local and national economy.

These objectives can only be achieved by the harnessing of the key strategic elements - Ranges, Programs, Resources, and Institutional Structure - in such a manner that once efficiently run they will interface and strengthen the Department's synergies. These key approaches will also strengthen the organization and its managers' new learning processes by complementing the technical competencies with business and management skills.

The plan outlines five key strategic results, that while it guarantees its sustainable existence, it takes into consideration reform initiatives:

1. Forest sustainably managed to maintain and improve their ecological functions and to contribute significantly to the local and national economy.
2. All programs streamlined to their core elements and harmonized for the efficient regulation and management of the forests.
3. The Forest Department well resourced at a level that will provide for the integrated and sustainable management of the ranges and its programmes.
4. Institutional and organizational Strengthening - Process management thorough the continuous learning process.
5. Institutional Structure: A dynamic organization with leadership equipped with a high sense of ownership, decision-making capability, flexibility and potential to become economical sustainable.

Critical to the success of the strategic initiatives of the Forest Department is the institutional and organizational capacity necessary to respond to the dynamics of the changing environment. The synergy between the three elements: 1) Programs, 2) Resources, and 3) Ranges, together with 4) the Institutional and Organizational Capacity, should provide an increased level of satisfaction for 5) its stakeholders.

The Forest Department has identified an extensive amount of training to be carried out as an initial step. This learning process, which includes the bridging of the technical with the wider management skills, is one of the critical processes within the resources elements that will strengthen the department to proactively respond to the challenges of the future. The two-way transfer of information to and from every level of the organization, and to the external stakeholders as well, will increase the contribution of the Department to its customers.

An increase in the contribution to its customers by the Ministry will be immediately seen when the Melinda Forest Station merges with the nearby Savannah Forest Station in the Stann Creek District. This merger will serve to reallocate both the human and physical resources of one station to the next for better coordination of activities and increase delivery of services.

Department of the Environment (DOE)

The recent completed National Capacity Self Assessment (NCSA) Project is the first that provided Belize with the opportunity to articulate a thorough self assessment and analysis of capacity needs, priorities and constraints that are currently hampering efforts at meeting the national obligations as outlined in the international UN Conventions on Biodiversity, UN Framework Convention on Climate Change and the UN Convention on Land Degradation/Drought.

The main objective of the NCSA Project was to allow synergies to be examined between the implementation of global environmental commitments and the objectives of meeting the country's sustainable development priorities. These are reflected in the Belize's National Capacity Self Assessment Report and in the Belize NCSA Action Plan for the Environmental Capacity Development.

In addition, one of the Project's Annual Output Targets was the updates of the Environmental Policy and Strategy, the National Environmental Action Plan and Review draft Policy and Legislation for Integrated Water Resources Management.

It is also worthy to state that the National Environmental Appraisal Committee (NEAC) which reviews Environmental Impact Assessments (EIAs), has as its members, not only government agencies but also, NGO's, and Civil Society. Furthermore, in the event the interested party has reasonable doubt that the committee has handed down an unfair review the regulations permits an appeals process. Once invoked, the Minister sets a three member tribunal to listen to the appeal.

In addition, in the preparation of any EIA, the interested parties must consult with the affected stakeholders and during the NEAC revisions stakeholders are once again consulted.

Among its various policies, the DOE has two which are worthy of mentioning:

1. Before any new legislation or amendments thereof is considered the DOE ensures wide stakeholders consultation.
2. Any public document published by DOE or any document resulting from any study conducted by interested parties in compliance with Environmental legislation or DOE such as EIAs are readily available to the public upon written request.

The DOE is developing training materials on environmental issues to be presented to teachers at a national workshop.

Policy Coordination Unit

The Ministry's Mission and mandate, its size and the complex and technical nature of its various portfolios require active efforts at coordinating policy on a constant basis. To this end, the Ministry has established a policy coordination unit with the express objective of facilitating the articulation of shared vision and objectives and the coordination of policies and activities across the various departments in order to achieve the common mission of the Ministry, as stated above. The Unit is comprised of the Policy Coordinator, Planning Coordinator and the Public Relations Officer.

Some of the direct responsibilities of the Policy Unit to achieve the Ministry's objectives are:

1. Coordinate communication plans for the Ministry's Departments and projects;
2. Develop, update and disseminate information materials for the Ministry;
3. Review project proposals for examination of their synergies with the Ministry's goals and objectives and provide recommendations to the CEO for endorsement;
4. Convene intra-ministerial policy and technical level meetings for identification of cross-sectoral issues and areas requiring support;
5. Support to trade, sustainable development and natural resource delegations, as needed;
6. Monitor the implementation of projects within the Ministry;
7. Monitor issues arising as part of attendance at regional and international meetings and as part of the Cabinet Directives;
8. Evaluate the coordination of the implementation of the Multi-lateral Environmental Agreements to which Belize is a party;

The Policy Unit is currently in the process of building a new internal communications strategy among senior management and between technical personnel to ensure that there is more effective coordination of activities. In addition, it is in the process of executing a new

communication strategy to showcase the departments' many activities and build public awareness on natural resources and sustainable development issues.

Local Government

Local Government, in collaboration with the Mayors Association, addressed some of the issues of Recommendation 86 made by the Political Reform Commission by enacting the following legislation:

1. An Act to amend the Towns property Evaluation Act to provide for an interest charge on arrears of property fees.
2. An Act to amend the Intoxicating Liquor Licensing Act to include a member of the District Association of Village Councils on the Licensing Board of each local authority; to designate the City or Town Administrator, or Village Secretary, to be the clerk of the Licensing Board; to require the holders of Publican Special licenses and Nigh Club Licences to provide security at their premises; to increase the penalties against contraventions of the act.
3. Town Councils (Utility Agencies) (Coordination) By-Laws: Establishes the Utility Coordination Unit to register and coordinate works to be conducted by all utility service providers in order to avoid any delays and obstruction to the general public.
4. An Act to amend the Belize Building Act: to strengthen and clarify the relationship between the Central Building Authority, local authorities and Local Building Authorities.

Conclusion

It is recognized that three years is extremely short for completing the transformation process to achieve a highly competent, efficient and motivated Ministry which will be recognized for the quality of its service and performance. This is exacerbated by budgetary constraints as well as limited human resources. Notwithstanding this, the gains achieved through the commitment and dedication of its staff has made it possible for this Ministry to come closer to its targeted objective.