

NEWS RELEASE

INTEGRITY COMMISSION'S INVESTIGATION LEADS TO IMPROVED GOVERNANCE AT THE MINISTRY OF THE ENVIRONMENT & WATER RESOURCES

It is not often that we hear of public officers who "raise the bar" and inspire teams to do the right thing. These leaders do the right thing, at the right time, for the right reasons. They put ethics before the bottom line and, as a result, they champion dedicated teams to embark on structured approaches to ensure compliance with applicable rules, regulations and policies.

This is the outcome of an investigation by the Integrity Commission of Trinidad and Tobago into the operations of the Forestry Division of the Ministry of the Environment and Water Resources regarding the allocation of State-owned Teak and Pine Units and Sawmill Licences. The Commission examined internal controls and made recommendations, which have been adopted, for improved governance at the Ministry of the Environment and Water Resources. The Commission, as part of its mandate to oversee the conduct of persons in public life continues to investigate and facilitate improved governance internal controls and accountability at State-funded organisations.

In June 2012 the Commission received a complaint and initiated investigations into allegation by a licensee of the Forest Division that a former Conservator of Forest -- in contravention of the Integrity in Public Life Act, Chapter 22:01 -- afforded undue preferential treatment to groups who applied, but did not meet the requirement for saw-millers' licenses. The complainant pointed to questionable practices being undertaken and the alleged improper granting of saw-millers' licences to certain persons as well as unfair awarding of same, even alleging that in the process gifts were being received for influencing the awarding of licences to particular persons.

As a result of the investigation by the Integrity Commission the Permanent Secretary in the Ministry of the Environment and Water Resources by letter dated 21 January 2014 was directed "to institute corrective action, with immediate effect, to ensure compliance with all applicable rules, regulations and policies, in an effort to eliminate opportunities for corrupt practices."

COMMISSIONERS: *Mr. Kenneth Gordon, Chairman; Mr. Justice Sebastian Ventour, Deputy Chairman;
Dr. Shelly-Anne Lalchan; Mr. Deonarine Jaggernaut.*

The Commission recommended the following:

1. The creation and implementation of a proper and detailed Standing Order Procedure containing sanctions which will detail the procedures to be adopted in the issuance of Saw Millers licences.
2. Adherence with the requirements of the Environmental Management Authority Act.
3. Increased supervision to ensure compliance with the requirements as stipulated in the Sawmill's Act, Chapter 66:02 and the Environmental Management Act, Chapter 35:05.
4. Appropriate training of all staff.
5. Introduction of Public Notices to educate members of the public of the procedures to be followed and the introduction of 'check lists' to ensure that the public knows when all requirements are being met.
6. Demonstrated adherence to the principles of good Governance.

Mrs. Vidiah Ramkhelawan, Permanent Secretary in the Ministry of the Environment and Water Resources has advised the Commission she has adopted "a hands-on approach to addressing compliance with the requirements of the Sawmill Act, Chapter 66:03 and the Environmental Management Act, Chapter 35:05. This being done to ensure increased supervision and training of all employees; the introduction of Public Notices to educate members of the public of the procedures to be followed; and the introduction of 'check lists' to ensure that all requirements have been met and demonstrated adherence to the principles of good governance."

The Permanent Secretary advised further that the Forestry Division, through the Ministry –

- Sought approval for a revised policy for the sale of State owned teak and pine;
- Instituted a system by which it has begun informing the Environmental Management Authority as well as the Town and Country Planning Division of Sawmill licensees who do not possess a Certificate of Environmental Clearance or who may not have the legal planning approvals.
- The Forestry Division will uphold its statutory obligation by publishing the names of licensed saw-millers.

The Integrity Commission has commended the Permanent Secretary for leading by example; instituting appropriate actions, creating the right environment, as well as facilitating arrangements for ethical conduct in the Ministry of the Environment and Water Resources.

12th September 2014.