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**Statement delivered by Honorable Minister Dr. Omar Figueroa, Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries, Forestry, the Environment, Sustainable Development & Climate Change to the High level Session of the Side Event “Food from the Ocean”**

6 June 2017, UNHQ

Distinguished colleagues, ladies and gentlemen.

I wish to thank the organizers for inviting me to participate in today’s side event “Food from the Ocean”. The focus of this event demonstrates vividly the interconnected nature of what we are discussing this week and other key development objectives.

I intend to present a brief overview of the fisheries sector in the Caribbean region, and focus on the case of Belize and how our ecosystem based approach to fisheries management has catalyzed wide ranging benefits not only to the immediate beneficiaries in our local fishing community but more broadly to the Belizean people as a whole and to our national patrimony.

The fisheries sector of the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) provides employment for approximately 115,988 persons and contributes from 0.32% to 2.3% to Gross Domestic Product (GDP). Fish exports from CARICOM for the years 2013 and 2014 were estimated at approximately US$289.95 million annually. In 2013 fish consumption in the CARICOM was estimated at 24 kg of fish per person per year, which was higher than the global average record of 20 kg/person/year in 2014. The actual contribution of fisheries to our economies is underestimated, since GDP figures do not capture the ancillary services associated with fisheries and the amount of production that is traded on the informal market.

Fish and fish products contribute significantly to domestic food security, job creation, income generation, economic development and have important linkages to the tourism sector in the Caribbean Region. So in essence the Fisheries sector is vital to our people’s livelihoods. Because of this reality, CARICOM developed the Caribbean Community Common Fisheries Policy which aims to ensure that the fisheries sector remains healthy, productive and viable into the future. I wish to acknowledge the tremendous efforts and continued good work of the Caribbean Regional Fisheries Mechanism in the elaboration and implementation of this policy.

It is noted that marine fish has been designated as one priority commodity within CARICOM and there are focused interventions to alleviate constraints to the development of this sector.

The development of the fisheries sector has been supported by its incorporation into the Agriculture, Food and Nutrition “thematic cluster”; consistent with the Community’s Strategic Plan in general; and in particular, the Food and Nutrition Strategy.

The implementation of this strategic direction for the fisheries sector responds to the need to provide high quality product for both local and export markets. In this regard, the Caribbean Community with assistance from the European Union has undertaken efforts to develop effective food safety systems that will provide better ways of handling seafood products; including, through the introduction of laws, regulations and a governance system to guarantee safe seafood. These efforts have also been supported by partnerships with the United Nations University, as well as, our own indigenous institutions of higher learning.

In my own country, Belize, fish contributes to domestic food security, livelihoods, economic development and is an important part of the tourism product in Belize. Fisheries continue to rank 4th in income earnings and contributes 3% to the country’s GDP.

Belize is committed to ensuring the sustainability of its small scale fisheries and has implemented a model for small-scale fisheries management based on three main pillars.

First, Belize’s laws provide for protection of critical marine habitats and associated fish species. The Government of Belize has over the years established a coastal network of nine (9) marine reserves, three (3) marine national parks, two (2) natural monuments, twelve (12) fish spawning aggregations sites and two (2) marine wildlife sanctuaries that in total cover some 4,051 km² (or 21.6 % of our territorial seas). Of this protected areas, some 619 km² (3% of our territorial seas) are designated as Replenishment zones or No-take areas.

The second pillar of Belize fisheries management model is a fully implemented national system of marine tenure and zoning that Belize calls Managed access. This management tool allocates fishing rights for Belize’s 3,000 traditional fishers and provides incentives for fishers to protect their fishing areas. The Managed Access system is unique – as it is multispecies system of fishing rights that covers the entire territorial waters of Belize, which no other country in the world has achieved thus far.

Also, Belize is developing an international scientific partnership to use a fisheries data-limited approach for setting harvest control rules on catches that will prevent and reverse overfishing. We are now employing this system for our Queen conch fishery, to ensure we are meeting our obligations to the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild fauna and Flora.

With the continued support of our existing and new regional and international partners, the Caribbean Community is ready for full implementation of its Common Fisheries Policy through which exemplifies its commitment to achieve the targets of Sustainable Development Goal # 14: to conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development.

As a small island developing states, the Caribbean Community also rely on collaboration and support from international development partners for technical and financial assistance. We encourage collaboration and support from friendly governments, conservation and development partners so assist our region in the implementation of the FAO Voluntary Guidelines for Sustainable Small-scale Fisheries, the Common Fisheries Policy among other regional fisheries initiatives.

The Government of Belize through the Belize Fisheries Department and staff is committed to collaboration with other SIDS Member States. We believe that we can strengthen our model and share valuable experiences and best practices with other states to achieve sustainable small scale fisheries.

In closing, I take this opportunity to again congratulate the organizers of this side event for convening this very important side event.

Thank you.