

## KAVA-Submission

### **SUBMISSION TO THE AUSTRALIAN OFFICE OF DRUG CONTROL ON THE 'PROPOSED PILOT PROGRAM ON EASEMENT OF THE IMPORT OF KAVA FOR PERSONAL USE' BY THE FIJI KAVA TASK FORCE**

Established in 2014 by the Ministry of Agriculture, the Fiji Kava Task Force continues to provide the central coordination, planning and consultation mechanism for the development of the industry in Fiji. Members of the Task Force include representatives from the government's Ministry of Agriculture, Ministry of Industry, Trade & Tourism, Ministry of Health, exporters of kava, Biosecurity Authority of Fiji, Fiji Crop & Livestock Council, University of the South Pacific and the Pacific Community.

This submission is provided in response to the Consultation Paper released by the Australian Government's Office of Drug Control Version 1.0 of 22 February 2019 'Pilot program to ease restrictions on the importation of kava for personal use'. The submission provides responses against the four specific questions raised in the paper plus broader information on Fiji's interests and efforts underway in growing exports of kava, existing export markets, the importance of this sector to the economy, and commentary on health-related issues.

1. The Fiji Kava Task Force considers '*a proposal to increase the quantity of kava that may be imported for personal use to 4 kilograms*' as a welcome step in the right direction and an increase in the volume to be carried by a passenger

The significance of kava is deeply rooted and embedded in the Fijian way of life. For centuries, it was exclusively used during traditional cultural ceremonies. While it remains an integral part of Fijian customs (at births, initiation into adulthood, weddings, deaths; introductions, conflict resolutions, mediation, consultations; kava is used as a mark of acceptance, recognition, endorsement and honour), the use of the drink has extended beyond the ambits of traditional and cultural protocols. It has evolved into a popular social drink in the modern Fiji, known for its calming effects that widely appeal to working urbanites.

As outlined in his foreword to the Fiji Kava Quality Manual, the former Minister for Agriculture, Rural and Maritime Development and National Disaster Management, the Honourable Inia Seruiratu wrote that "the place of kava or '*yaqona*' in the cultural life of Fijians is so central that it is referred to as '*wai ni vanua*' (drink of the people). It has also been adopted by the Europeans, Fijians of Indian descent and other communities that have made Fiji their home. It has become the national drink of Fiji and is part of our identity as Fijians." For more information, please find attached copy of the Fiji Kava Quality Manual for your reference.

Renowned Pacific educator, Konai Helu Thaman (1992) in discussing the value of culture quoted 'we in Fiji and in the South Pacific must not allow our own cultures to be undermined. Our cultures make us what we are. Without them, we are like debris in the ocean. Culture is the soul of the people. It is what we were, what we are and with appropriate education, what we can become...'

Currently, the Fijian (and related) communities in Australia are unable to fully express their cultural uses of kava due to its unavailability and restricted use. Thus, it is considered that the proposed increase from 2kgs to 4kgs is inadequate not only in terms of meeting the needs for the personal use

of by our Fijian and Pacific Island communities in Australia for their social and ceremonial functions but also to allow for meaningful information to be collected and evaluated to address the remaining considerations for the pilot program. Kava is prepared as a beverage with the kavalactones being extracted with water for consumption during our cultural and traditional ceremonies as well as for our social gatherings. In this context, kava is seldomly consumed alone but customarily by a group of individuals or communities at a meeting or gatherings or “kava sessions”. In each of these community meetings/ social gatherings and kava sessions, it would be normal for a total of several litres of kava beverage would be consumed; with each individual consuming an estimated 500ml to 1 Litre or more of kava beverage. Depending on how the kava beverage is prepared, the general rule is around 80-100g of kava powder will make 1-1.5 Litres of kava beverage. Meaning that 4kg of kava powder could be used to prepare approximately 60Litres of kava beverage.

An increase from 2kgs to 10kgs of kava imported for personal use is considered more appropriate to test whether the pilot program has achieved its objectives including to identify key strengths and weaknesses (gaps) for further consideration and discussion.

For practical purposes in efficiently and hygienically importing the kava into Australia, an increase to 10kgs could be supported by packaging specifications including minimum labelling requirements, clean, secure and easy to handle for inspection.

2. The Fiji Kava Task Force considers ‘*any impact increasing the quantity of kava imported for personal use may have on the community*’ as positive and suitable, noting that there are different perspectives in terms of the Fijian and the Pacific diaspora. It is also acknowledged that there is uncertainty over what the current impacts are in Australian indigenous communities so that aspect would need more investigation either within or parallel to the pilot program. The increased quantity would assist with carrying out cultural and social traditions and obligations.

As outlined in the Fiji Kava Quality standard, Kava is defined by the plant species *Piper methysticum* and/or to the traditional beverage obtained by cold water extraction of the plant’s drinkable parts.

The desirable varieties of kava in Fiji are characterised by the concentration of 6 major kavalactones in the kava roots namely:

- 1) Desmethoxyyangonin;
- 2) Dihydrokavain;
- 3) Yangonin;
- 4) Kavain;
- 5) Dihydromethysticin; and
- 6) Methysticin.

The major kavalactones have been reported to have no impact to human health, which is consistent with findings of a technical report into the human health risks of kava by the Food Standards Australia and New Zealand (FSANZ 2004). In this report, it stated that the most common side effect of heavy kava consumption over an extended period is a skin rash known as kava dermatopathy or *kani kani*, characterised by flaky, dry skin with a yellowish discolouration of both the skin and nails. This condition is reversible when kava consumption is discontinued.

Study done by Balick and Lee (2002), Lebot (2006) found that the level and frequency of consumption of the kava beverage varies between individuals, between sexes, within communities, between South Pacific islanders and also depends on the social context for the kava beverage consumption. Additionally, Matthews et al (1988) estimated that on average the consumption level was classified into the following categories for intake – 100g of kava powder per week (occasional drinker), 310g/week (heavy drinker) or 400g/week (very heavy drinker). These findings were just a projection into the overview of kava beverage consumption that is common in the Pacific Islands and has been for decades since 2000 years ago and more recently in other nearby communities. Adverse health effects (such as hepatotoxicity) with heavy consumption of kava was found to be negligible provided the preparation was infused with cold water extraction only and not with any other form of organic solvents (WHO (2007), FAO (2016)). There is extensive literature in support of this which also aided in the lifting of the “European Kava Ban” following a 12-year court battle involving many kava experts in 2012.

Additionally there were three reported cases in the South Pacific that was evaluated by Russmann et al (2003) and Christl et al (2009) – (2) from New Caledonia and (1) from Samoa showing signs of elevated liver enzymes (AST, ALT, GGT, AP, LDH) and changes in their other clinical pathology parameters which were indicative of liver damage when consuming kava in large amounts. However, these individuals had a history of medications use prior to kava consumption contributing to their liver damage status. The reported individuals recovered after cessation of kava use. Interestingly Russman et al (2003) had also surveyed 27 heavy kava drinkers from New Caledonia and found that they were all in good general health with no symptoms of liver disease.

It is acknowledged high levels of kava consumption can cause drying of skin (kava demopathy or “kanikani” in Fijian) but this is reversible upon cessation and does not necessarily lead to chronic skin diseases. Positive health impacts of kava consumption include reducing anxiety stress and restlessness, providing muscle relaxant, and aiding with sleeping disorders.

On the social front the increased quantity would enable Fijians and the Pacific Islander communities in Australia in carrying out their ceremonial, cultural and social traditions and obligations which leads to communal acceptance and fostering greater traditional relationships in the manner of the occasion.

Kava is considered the best alternative to alcohol consumption for Pacific Island men as reported by Nosa and Ofanoa (2009) who conducted qualitative interviews on 12 married men of Tongan heritage aged between 30 and 75 years residing in Auckland New Zealand.

It should be noted that a Codex Regional Standard is being developed for kava and kava products for the Codex North America and the South West Pacific (NASWP) region. The support from Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the United States of America (the Quad countries) in the development of the draft sends a strong message confirming the safety of kava and kava products being prepared and consumed in the traditional form – i.e. kava beverage extracted with water.

3. The Fiji Kava Task Force considers *‘the approach to evaluate the pilot program, including health, social harms, and feedback on the program’* needs to include active participation by Fijian stakeholders including those represented on the Fiji Kava Task Force. It is considered

crucial that the approach to the planning, implementation and evaluation of the pilot program is well informed, inclusive of quantitative and qualitative data collected both in Australia and Fiji and considers multiple perspectives. Also noting that adequate resources would need to be allocated for this engagement including data collection.

Currently, there is no mandatory requirement at the Fijian side for data on personal consignments of kava being taken to Australia to be recorded. Hence no data is currently available such as on the frequency it is taken, profile of passengers carrying kava, where it is purchased or approximate value. Depending on the agreed methodology, there are a range of possible approaches to gathering data on travellers out of Fiji, bound for Australia that are carrying consignments of kava. It is anticipated that this effort would be led by the Biosecurity Authority of Fiji and the Department of Immigration with support being provided by the airlines and members of the Fiji Kava Task Force. It should be highlighted in this submission that any methodology or process being proposed or introduced to facilitate the collection of information during this trial should not be borne by the travelling public from Fiji.

To ensure the appropriate information is collected for the evaluation of the outcomes of this trial, key stakeholders (farmers, processors, exporters, BAF etc) in Fiji and other PICs would need to be invited to participate in the trial. A questionnaire would need to be developed to capture baseline information that address the key objectives of the trial such as:

- Has the increase in the amount of kava being taken to Australia via passengers improved your livelihood? If yes;
  - How? How much?
  - When?

On the Australia side, the Department of Health could request the assistance of the relevant Australian agencies (Department of Customs, Department of Agriculture and Water Resources, etc) to collect this information as the passengers are being screened on-arrival.

Consumers of kava and kava products including the community and sporting groups that use kava for ceremonial and social activities in Australia would need to be invited to participate by registering with the Department of Health. The participation of these stakeholders will allow the relevant authorities to ascertain the health and social impacts of the increase in the amount of kava being imported.

Additionally, the ODC should also reach out to leaders (men and women) of Pacific Island communities to discuss and collect information on the use of kava. Information about the use of kava and how kava has helped to address anti-social behaviors within the Pacific Island youths should be collected and be included in the evaluation of the trial outcomes.

Finally, the pilot program would also require an awareness raising campaign for the travelling public with a combination of structured information on social media. The approach and content to this campaign being something the Fiji Kava Task Force would seek to develop in collaboration with relevant Australian agencies and stakeholders.

4. The Fiji Task Force considers '*the duration of pilot program*' of one year (rather than two years) is sufficient. It is instead proposed that the pilot be implemented for one year with on-going

monitoring and a review and evaluation to be held in the first month of the second year. This is considered adequate time to collect data across the full year covering trends in passenger movements, family and community events and festivities, and potentially price fluctuations which may impact on demand. A duration of one year followed by a structured evaluation point also provide the flexibility for a further up to 12 months to amend the pilot including the associated monitoring and evaluation.

### **Further background and context**

Fiji's kava sector has grown rapidly between 2015 and 2018 with prices rising as much as 100 per cent. At this stage the sale of kava has outstripped the more traditional export crops of sugar cane and dalo in terms of foreign earnings. Kava is gaining popularity with other ethnic groups outside the Pacific Islands diaspora. Even elite athletes who are involved in physically demanding contact sports are also reported to seek the kava beverage to provide that relaxing feeling after sports or a game. The high kava prices promise a greater income for farmers in the rural communities. While the increase in price per kilogram of kava at the domestic and international markets is showing signs of slowing down, the recent lifting of the German ban on kava for the German and European markets and the expansion to the number of kava bars in the United States has highlighted the importance of maintaining the quality of kava products exported.

A value chain analysis completed in 2017 found that there are 10,400 rural Fijian households (1 in 8 rural households) that cultivate kava as their source of livelihood and there are islands and provinces (such as Kadavu, Ovalau & Gau) where kava is the principal source of income. Hence the importance of kava not only to Fijian culture and identity, but also the overall economy and livelihoods of many communities can not be underestimated.

It is, therefore, imperative to develop and adopt measures which ensure that only the highest quality kava products leave Fiji's shores and that growers and processors can meet the quantity and quality needed at home and in foreign markets. Increased productivity is needed to address demand but this must be done in conjunction with strict quality controls so Fiji maintains its credibility in the market.

The Fiji Kava Task Force is spearheading effort so that growers, middlemen, processors and exporters take on a fresh approach to kava production and processing, meeting quality standards at every point in the supply chain. Studies conducted within the industry have provided a platform from which to build a newer, better Fiji Kava Industry based on international quality standards and able to supply international markets while also producing top quality for local consumers.

It is gratefully acknowledged that this pilot program is a step in the right direction as ultimately, Fiji would like to see consumers in Australia able to enjoy the benefits of premium Fiji grown and processed kava that other countries such as New Zealand, Unites States of America, United Kingdom, Germany and other Pacific island countries are importing commercially.

In closing, the kava stakeholders in Fiji welcomes this opportunity to work with the Australian authorities on this trial. While we are unclear about the points below, we are hopeful that the outcomes from this trial will help to improve the kava use is perceived and treated in Australia.

- What happens at the end of the trial?

- Will this trial on the imports of kava for personal use lead to a trial of commercial exports of kava from Fiji and the other Pacific Island Countries?

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Wishing you a happy and meaningful Easter.

David Kolitagane

**Permanent Secretary for Agriculture (Chairman of the Kava Taskforce)**

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