

Earth today | call for renewed push to plant trees amid covid-19 epidemic

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Three Million Trees in Three Years' national tree-planting programme aims to support reforestation efforts on the island.

INCLUDED IN the host of lessons from the COVID-19 experience is one about trees and their role and value as the 'lungs of the earth'.

"Trees are the lungs of the earth, and the lungs of the earth are connected to the lungs of the body," said Eleanor Jones.

According to Jones, with the millions of infections and deaths associated with the respiratory illness, which has impacted countries the world over, planting trees, and especially in urban centres, has never been more important.

The why, she said, has to do with the fact that air quality has been found, at least preliminarily, to affect the prognosis of persons with COVID-19.

"As well as predisposing the people who have lived with polluted air for decades, scientists have also suggested that air pollution particles may be acting as vehicles for viral transmission," reads a BBC article dated April 27 on the subject, citing the work of researchers out of the United States.

"One recent study found that even small increases in fine particulate matter, known as PM2.5, have had an outsized effect in the US. An increase of just 1 microgram per cubic metre corresponded to a 15% increase in COVID-19 deaths, according to the researchers, led by Xiao Wu and Rachel Nethery at the Harvard University T.H. Chan School of Public Health," the article added.

Trees, meanwhile, enjoy the reputation as ‘lungs of the earth’, owing to their function to turn carbon dioxide into clean, pure oxygen while also helping to cool the planet. They also serve as significant carbon sinks, thus aiding in the climate change fight.

FAST ACTION

It is bearing this in mind that the Private Sector Organisation of Jamaica (PSOJ) is moving quickly to action their commitment under the National Tree Planting Programme, launched by Prime Minister Andrew Holness in October 2019.

The Forestry Department-managed programme targets the planting of three million timber and ornamental trees over three years. Up to January this year, more than 85,000 seedlings had been distributed and 57 hectares planted in forest estates across the island.

In the coming weeks and months, Jones, who heads the PSOJ’s Energy, Environment and Climate Change Committee, said they are looking to run full speed ahead with their undertaking to planting a half a million trees.

“The PSOJ is to energise those efforts. We are now developing the operational framework to roll out that programme to get businesses involved. Some have committed already – whether they are directly involved with the tree planting or providing funding to assist,” she said.

“We have leadership now that is sensitive to the significance of these issues to sustainable development and so we are pushing in these areas, advocating for the engagement of business with these sectors which are so important to development that is sustainable,” she added.

TRAINING PROGRAMME

The National Tree Planting Programme is to support local reforestation efforts and the engagement of environmentally focused Housing, Opportunity, Production and Employment (HOPE) interns. A reported 1,000 HOPE interns have the opportunity to be trained and certified in core elements of forest management, including seedling production, tree establishment and maintenance, and forest law.

In addition to the HOPE interns benefiting under the programme, employment opportunities will be provided for persons from communities adjacent to areas to be planted.

Ultimately, the programme is intended to see the planting of two million timber/forest seedlings on approximately 3,000 hectares of land, and the remaining one million timber and ornamental seedlings distributed to the public and planted in urban spaces, including roadways, parks, and along major thoroughfares in towns across the island.

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