

STATEMENT BY HONOURABLE KATHERINE EBANKS-WILKS
MINISTER FOR SUSTAINABILITY AND CLIMATE RESILIENCY
RE: CAYMAN ISLANDS CLIMATE CHANGE POLICY 2024-2050

Introduction

Mister Speaker, I am pleased to present to the Members of this Honourable House, the approved Cayman Islands Climate Change Policy 2024-2050, which outlines a 26-year plan for our beloved Cayman Islands for adaptation and mitigation in order to achieve the Policy's vision of a climate-resilient Cayman Islands that promotes and sustains vibrant communities, a robust economy, and a thriving natural environment.

Mister Speaker, this is a historic milestone for our country and it comes at a time when the impacts of climate change are dominating both local and international headlines. As a nation we have recently experienced Hurricane Beryl, and witnessed the utter devastation wrought upon parts of the United States by Hurricane Helene. Even now, residents of Florida are bracing for Hurricane Milton which has intensified rapidly into the most powerful storm of the year worldwide.

And as we pray for the safety of our friends and family members in Florida, our own islands continue to experience flooding and coastal erosion which pose serious risks to our people and their homes and businesses.

We know that increasingly warmer ocean waters contribute to the strength and intensity of hurricanes in our region. While we cannot prevent these severe weather events, this policy enables us to take proactive steps to safeguard and support our people, our economy and our environment.

This is why I am so proud to see this historic Policy approved by Cabinet and to be able to table this document in this Honourable House today.

Mister Speaker, this is the first time that a Climate Change Policy has been approved for the Cayman Islands. This Policy, which has been worked on for two years by the Policy Team in the Ministry of Sustainability and Climate Resiliency and the Technical Working Group, is the result of multi-stakeholder engagement carried out over that period, as well as building on the draft Policy from 2011. The policy is also bolstered by fresh insights and circumstances that were identified in the Cayman Islands Climate Change Risk Assessment 2022, taking into further consideration the needs of the most vulnerable in our society such as children, the elderly, disabled, and the economically disadvantaged, and also implications for the Financial Services Sector.

The core goals of the Policy are to increase resilience to climate change, to support the transition to a low-carbon economy, and to ensure climate actions are fair and take future generations into account.

The approval of this Policy is testament to the incredible dedication of the Cayman Islands Government, my Ministry of Sustainability & Climate Resiliency, and to our community who showed up to public meetings and gave their feedback on the draft Policy when it went through a full 60 days of public consultation in 2023.

This Policy is a strategic pathway for a more climate-resilient future for the benefit of us all, and the key to its success is in the collaboration of everyone.

The Policy sets out clear timeframes and strategic actions which will move the country towards the Policy's goals, and outlines twenty-three (23) "quick-wins" that have been identified as short-term actions - deliverable between 2024 and 2030 - that will build momentum toward the Policy's vision. The quick wins include identifying climate-related financial opportunities and vulnerabilities, progressing the Coastal Setback Reference Line reassessment, and implementing a National Sargassum Management Strategy, to name a few.

To ensure relevancy and flexibility, the Policy will be reviewed every two years. This process allows the Ministry to integrate updated scientific findings, climate data, and technological innovations into the ongoing implementation of the policy.

Mister Speaker, the Policy is largely guided by the Climate Change Risk Assessment which was conducted in 2022. Funded through the Governor's Office by the United Kingdom's Conflict, Stability and Security Fund, and following extensive desktop research, technical stakeholder consultation and public engagement, the resulting Cayman Islands Climate Change Evidence Report (2022) is now the most comprehensive reference document to date on the potential implications of climate change on the Cayman Island's environment, society and economy. The use of the Climate Change Risk Assessment as a guiding document ensures that the policy is grounded in the most current climate science available that is specific to our islands and our region.

Mister Speaker, the Policy focuses on improving the health, safety, and overall wellbeing of our communities by ensuring resilient infrastructure, safeguarding livelihoods, particularly for vulnerable groups, and protecting

natural ecosystems. Strategies for achieving these aims are outlined through six, key focus areas of the Policy:

The first is **Robust economy** which speaks to the need for economic diversification and sustainable livelihoods.

The second is **Liveable built environment** which highlights strategies for climate-resilient infrastructure and planning.

The third is **Healthy and resilient communities** which focuses on better health and safety outcomes.

The fourth is **Resilient infrastructure networks** which speaks to the need to enhancing critical infrastructure to withstand extreme weather events.

The fifth is **Harmony with nature** which outlines the need to protecting natural ecosystems to support a healthy economy and community.

And the sixth and final focus area is **Integration and coordination** which sets out strategies for streamlining government processes for urgent climate action.

The success of this Policy, Mister Speaker, is contingent on collaboration, across the Government and across all sectors of our economy. Although my Ministry has 'climate resiliency' in its name, the reality is that every Ministry, Department, company, organisation and individual in our country has a role to play in creating a more climate-resilient future for our beloved islands. Climate change is a complex issue that requires coordinated effort across many sectors.

To support this, the Policy places an emphasis on cross-sectoral cooperation, engaging both government ministries and external stakeholders. This collaborative approach aims to embed climate resiliency into the national agenda.

Although climate change is often thought of in terms of its environmental impacts, the impacts of climate change on human lives and livelihoods is increasingly in the spotlight. An example of this was the impact that each of us experienced with the recent flooding events that affected our homes, schools, and businesses.

Climate Change affects our lives, Mister Speaker, not just our environment.

That is why the Climate Change Policy sets our strategies to support economic diversification, aiming to create sustainable livelihoods and make our economy more resilient to climate shocks. By acting now, we are protecting both the financial services sector and the broader economy from climate-related risks. Specific areas such as resilient infrastructure and safeguarding the natural environment are key to protecting tourism and other critical sectors. By reducing climate risks, the policy aims to ensure the long-term sustainability of these industries.

Mister Speaker, as the Minister with responsibility for Gender Affairs, it was also extremely important to me and my Ministry team that the Policy address issues of equity and inclusivity. The Policy explicitly mentions the importance of addressing the needs of vulnerable groups such as children, the elderly, disabled individuals, and low-income households. Climate change risk factors disproportionately impact these groups of people and it is important that our strategies and actions take this into account.

Now that the Policy has been approved by Cabinet and tabled in this Honourable House, the Ministry of Sustainability & Climate Resiliency can continue the process of developing a comprehensive implementation plan. This will involve consultations with both internal and external stakeholders to

ensure a coordinated approach. The focus will be on identifying the resources, partnerships, and strategies needed to achieve the policy's long-term goals of climate resiliency, low-carbon transition, and fair governance.

One of the most urgent actions is the formation of the Climate Change Council. The Council will be responsible for the timely and coordinated implementation and review of the Policy, and its functions and composition shall be set in legislation. One of the core functions of the Council will be to promote a cohesive national response to urgent climate action set out in the Policy, and have oversight of policy implementation and periodic review.

Mister Speaker, in addition to the formation of the Council, the Policy addresses the urgent need to secure funding and resources for the work of implementing the Policy. While the Policy outlines that these costs will be, where possible, absorbed within the operational budgets of Government ministries and portfolios, the Policy also aims to establish a Climate Resiliency Fund, through legislation, to fund the timely implementation of this and future updates of the Policy.

Earlier this year, the Premier of the Cayman Islands the Honourable Juliana O'Connor Connolly, JP, MP, wrote to the His Majesty's Government, in her capacity as President of the United Kingdom Overseas Territories Association, to advocate for increased access by the Overseas Territories to international climate finance mechanisms and request a focused dialogue with the Territories to address these issues through the establishment of a dedicated, transparent United Kingdom Climate Fund for the Overseas Territories. The approval of this Policy, and the creation of a local Climate Resiliency Fund, will enable the Cayman Islands to be well-placed to take advantage of any

opportunities that should arise from these discussions with the United Kingdom Government.

Mister Speaker, the Climate Change Policy also provides a governance framework for climate action which includes cooperation and coordination across ministries and departments, the private and public sectors and civil society, and I look forward to seeing this Policy make a real and positive change in the future outlook for all three of our beloved Cayman Islands.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Mister Speaker, I cannot overstate the importance of the Cayman Islands Climate Change Policy or the significance of this moment.

The Cayman Islands and the wider Caribbean region have experienced more intense rainfall events and tropical storms, putting communities and critical infrastructure at greater risk of flooding and damage. Warmer sea temperatures and longer periods of drought jeopardise the health and viability of valuable, limited natural resources, upon which our tourism, our food security, our livelihoods, and our quality of life depend.

Despite this, there are many opportunities to adapt to these changing conditions, building our resiliency, and thriving in spite of inevitable disruptions. The strategic measures outlined in this Policy aim to lower the risks that climate change poses to key sectors and vulnerable groups by reducing vulnerabilities, adapting, and embracing sustainable, low-carbon economic activities.

Together, we can and will realise our vision of a climate-resilient Cayman Islands that promotes and sustains vibrant communities, a robust economy,

and a thriving natural environment, where people can live their best lives now and for future generations.

Mister Speaker, before I close, I want thank my Government colleagues for their support of this Policy, to my Ministry team for their hard work and dedication, to the many other Civil Servants who contributed to the development of this Policy, and to the many, many individuals who helped shape this Policy through their participation in town hall meetings and industry focus groups, and by providing written feedback on the Policy. Today's historic tabling of the country's first, national Climate Change Policy would not be possible without your efforts and support.

In closing, I want to encourage the community to visit the Ministry's website at www.gov.ky/Sustainability to learn more about the Policy and download the full document.

Thank you, Mister Speaker.