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Deputy Premier attends OECS Meeting on Environmental Sustainability

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Deputy Premier and Minister for Environment, Natural Resources and Climate Change Honourable Julian Fraser attended the 12th annual meeting of the Organisation of Eastern Caribbean States (OECS) Council of Ministers: Environmental Sustainability (COM:ES 12) Antigua and Barbuda held on April 29.

Honourable Fraser presented remarks as the outgoing Chairman of the Council of Ministers: Environmental Sustainability on behalf of the Government and people of the Virgin Islands. He expressed gratitude for the Council's hard work on the COM:ES Roadmap to 2030, which charts the OECS regional agenda and priorities for environmental sustainability to the end of the decade.

Honourable Fraser also wished incoming Chair, Minister for Health, Wellness and Environment of Antigua and Barbuda Honourable Sir Molwyn Joseph success during his leadership.

The Deputy Premier also participated in a ministerial panel on the topic *Finance and Capacity: Mobilisation of Resources and Partnerships; Regional Sustainable Financing Mechanism*. He presented on the background, principles and operationalisation of the Virgin Islands Climate Change Trust Fund as a model for sustainable financing of the climate change response in the UK Overseas Territories.

Honourable Fraser said due to the Virgin Islands' status as an UK Overseas Territory, it is unable to access traditional climate financing available to independent small island developing states in the region to reduce the impacts of climate change that are already being felt.

He said stronger hurricanes, more frequent and severe flood events, heat waves, mass sargassum landings and sea level rise are just some of the climate change impacts that will have far-reaching effects across communities, infrastructure and the tourism and financial services sector.

Honourable Fraser said, "There is no access to structural funds to build resilient infrastructure, facilities and communities and to climate-proof our economies or to support our transition to renewable energy and a low carbon economy",

He added that the Territory's status as Overseas Territories makes it automatically ineligible to access the Global Environment Facility, Adaptation Fund, Green Climate Fund and the new Loss and Damage Fund.

"This is fundamentally because the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change does not recognise the special and distinguished case of the Overseas Territories" the Deputy Premier said, adding, "In the eyes of the Convention, we do not exist. But we exist in reality and, from the perspective of climate change vulnerability and adaptive capacity, the key characteristics of "Small Island", "internal self-governance" and "responsibility for socio-economic development" put Overseas Territories in exactly the same boat as all Small Island Developing States."

Meanwhile, Director General of the OECS Commission, Dr Didacus Jules, congratulated the Virgin Islands on the establishment of the Virgin Islands Climate Change Trust Fund as a novel approach to the longstanding issue of limited access to funding by the overseas territories.

The Trust Fund was legally established by the Virgin Islands Climate Change Trust Fund Act 2015 as a body corporate with the mandate to raise, manage and on-grant donor funds to eligible actors to support local climate change adaptation and mitigation priorities.

The fund will be operationalised this year and internationally launched at the 30th Conference of Parties (COP30) of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change in November.

Other topics discussed at COMES:12 included ocean governance, waste management (in particular plastic pollution), sustainable energy and biodiversity.

The theme for this year's meeting was, *"Staying the Course in Perilous Times: Sustainable Transformation and Resilient Prosperity"*.

The Deputy Premier was accompanied to the meeting by Acting Deputy Secretary Tessa Smith Claxton and Private Secretary to the minister Ms Gloria Mactavious.