

THE UNITED STATES VIRGIN ISLANDS DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE



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Testimony of Commissioner Designee Carlos Robles V.I. Department of Agriculture April 13, 2015

Good afternoon to the Honorable Jeanette Millin-Young, Chairperson of Committee on Economic Development, Agriculture, and Planning, other committee and non-committee members present, and to the viewing and listening audience.

I bring you greetings from the extremely hard working men and women of the Virgin Islands Department of Agriculture (VIDOA). I want to thank you for the opportunity to present my brief testimony on bill number 31-0055, an act providing for a feasibility study for establishing a plant for the processing of local fruits and other agricultural products.

One component of the food production process is the post-harvest handling of commodities such as fruits, vegetables, meats etc. Once harvested or slaughtered, then marketed through wholesale or retail avenues, unsold products are either given away, stored for resale, or converted in to a value-added item such as preserves, drinks, ingredients for cakes and pastries, wines or other types of products. Stewed cherries, “tarmun” balls, pineapple, guavaberry tarts, and hot pepper sauces are some of the more common value added products known to Virgin Islanders. Within the last 10 years, other products such as bees wax, bee pollen, honey wine or mead, honey pepper bottles, and kenep and lemon grass drizzlers have emerged in the market place and are available for sale to residents and visiting guests.

Most of the value added entrepreneurs that I am aware of operate from their homes and manufacture the products themselves or with help from family and friends. Some entrepreneurs have products that are in high demand and would most likely want to increase production but don’t have the manpower or facilities to expand their business. Other would-be entrepreneurs don’t have the facilities or the manpower to manufacture a product or products and would welcome the opportunity to rent space in a public facility.

Many of our existing value-added entrepreneurs can be seen at our cultural events such as carnival, the agriculture and food fairs and within recent year's special events such the Mango Melee and Tropical Fruits Festival here on St. Croix and the Value Added Vendorama sponsored by the VIDOA.

I want to commend Senator Myron D. Jackson for proposing this study. I believe that this is the most critical step in determining if a processing facility is needed.

The bill however, does not include a dollar value for this study. At this time, my department is not in a position to fund a study of this magnitude. The Economic Development Authority may be a good resource for the scope and cost of this study since they have conducted similar studies in the past. The Eastern Caribbean Center at the University of the Virgin Islands is also a great resource and would be able to give a range of costs for such a study.

If this bill is funded and becomes law, the VI Department of Agriculture is willing to partner with the University of the Virgin Islands or the Economic Development Authority to ensure that this study is completed.

The data gathered from this study will be a positive step in achieving our goal of having more home grown products on the tables of Virgin Islanders. This ends my testimony and I look forward to your questions.