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**TESTIMONY OF COMMISSIONER CARLOS ROBLES OF
THE VI DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE**

31ST LEGISLATURE – COMMITTEE ON FINANCE

Good afternoon to the Honorable Clifford Graham, Chairperson of the Committee on Finance, other committee members and non-committee members present, and to the viewing and listening audience.

My name is Carlos Robles Commissioner of the Virgin Islands Department of Agriculture. I appear before the committee to defend our Fiscal Year 2017 budget as submitted by the Honorable Governor Kenneth E. Mapp and the Office of Management and Budget. I bring you greetings from the rest of the hard working men and women of the Virgin Islands Department of Agriculture (VIDOA). Present with me today are some of the members of my team from all three islands, Assistant Commissioner Errol Chichester, Deputy Commissioner Dr. Arthur Petersen Jr. Director of Administration & Management Delreese Brown, Director of Veterinary Services Dr. Bethany Bradford, Urban & Community Forestry Coordinator Marilyn Chakroff, Mr. Cardinal Richardson Director of Abattoir and Mr. Raymond Thomas Supervisor, Agriculture Development.

The mission of the Virgin Islands Department of Agriculture is to develop, support and promote the development of an economically profitable agriculture industry in the US Virgin Islands, while protecting consumers and the environment. The VIDO is mindful of the serious financial condition of the Government of the Virgin Islands and understands the battles between budgets and financial reality.

The Fiscal Year 2017 General Fund budget for the VIDO is \$4,087,000.00, which is essentially the same as the FY 2016 General Fund Appropriation though funding levels for the categories have changes. The FY 2017 budget includes ten (10) vacant positions that are critical to the department's operation, four of which is also funded in FY 2016 and we hope to have these positions filled by the end of this fiscal year.

The VIDO is also looking at a \$300,000.00 appropriation from the Miscellaneous Section for the three animal shelters of the Virgin Islands which is an increase of \$110,000 over the FY 2016 amount of \$190,000.00. The three humane societies play a critical role on behalf of the VIDO with issues related to and above domestic animal calls.

Besides monies that are appropriated by the Legislature, in FY 2017, the VIDOA also can anticipate federal funds totaling \$227,000.00. This amount will be increased as our grantor agencies release funds as their regional funds are released to them. We also anticipate as competitive funding opportunities come up, if the VIDOA sees it will be beneficial to the territory and can be properly managed, our federal grant monies will increase. For example we have applied for and awaiting final confirmation of a Farmers Market Nutrition Program grant which will make monies available to WIC participants to purchase produce from approved local farmers. The amount of \$227,000.00 represents the approved amount that has been confirmed with the USDA for 2016 at the time budget call was submitted.

The Agriculture Revolving Fund is fueled by revenues collected at the VIDOA for various items such as seedling sales, land lease rental, land preparation services, hay, animal feed, fertilizer sales, veterinary services, etc. Our projected collection for FY 2017 is a modest \$200,000. Numerous factors affect our revenue collections to include adverse weather conditions, downtime of equipment, private competitors, off-island purchases, low staffing levels, etc. In FY 2015, we expended \$206,067.72 from the Agriculture Revolving Fund and to date, we have expended over \$ 278,000.00. The passage of Act # 7751 appropriating \$500,000 for drought relief, also resulted in an increase revenues collection. All supplies purchased under this act to include animal feed, hay, and fruit trees were sold at cost and even at a lost to farmers. With the passage of Act #7767 the department has realized, in June of 2016, an additional \$1,000,000 to the revolving fund which is vitally needed to procure additional goods and services for the departmental operations. We are in the process of developing a spending plan to best utilize these funds.

At this time, I am going to ask Ms. Delreese Brown, Director of Administration and Management to present the highlights from our human resources division.

HUMAN RESOURCES

For FY 2016, the VIDOA has been very active increasing its staffing levels and the salaries of senior classified and unclassified employees. The VIDOA added to its personnel listing the following positions as new hires:

- Forest Stewardship Coordinator (federally-funded)
- Deputy Commissioner
- Maintenance Mechanic
- Director, Marketing Services
- Laborer
- Property Manager – STX District

We are working on filling the positions of Executive Assistant in the STX District and Director of Agriculture Development and Maintenance Engineer in the STT/STJ District before the end of the fiscal year.

With the numerous vacancies available in the FY 2017 budget, the VIDOA would like to continue to bring back up its staffing levels to previous years.

These vacancies include:

- Agronomist
- Heavy Equipment Mechanic
- Heavy Equipment Operator
- Veterinarian
- Property Manager – STT/STJ District
- Industrial Engineer
- Butcher

With the increased funding that was given to the VIDOA from this body for FY 2016 and the direction and approval of Governor Kenneth Mapp, we are happy to report that all employees hired before October 1, 2015 was given salary increases. The employees covered by the Our Virgin Islands Labor Union was finally able to negotiate and have their contract executed on March 18, 2016. With that newly executed contract, those employees received salary increases for the first time since 2007. The employees covered by the United Steelworkers – Masters Union, because of initiatives set forth by Governor Mapp, received salary increases for the first time since 2004. Unclassified employees, excluding the three agency heads, received salary increases for the first time since 2005. This has greatly improved the overall employee morale and optimism of our staff. Again we would like to thank all involved for these increases.

The VIDOA has also undertaken a training initiative to improve employee morale. This includes a recent weeklong training for the Agriculture Development Division employees (mainly our operators and mechanics) to Puerto Rico to receive hands-on training from the two machinery and equipment companies we work with – R&B Power and RIMCO. We are looking into training off-island for our butchers and other staff of the Abattoir Division. Other staff members have attended training from OSHA on safety matters, the VI Dept. of Tourism on customer service, and the Public Employees Relations Board on administrative and disciplinary matters. Newly hired employees attended the New Employees’ Orientation and Sexual Harassment Training by the Division of Personnel.

I will now highlight some of the accomplishments of the VIDOA under my leadership.

Accomplishments for the department thus far are as follows:

Phase III of the Bordeaux Farmers Market Project has commenced this past June. This phase involves the construction of a retaining wall on the southern side of the market. This project is made possible from funding authorizations totaling \$1,110,403.20 from the VI Housing Finance Authority’s Community Development Block Grant program. To date, we have expended \$750,899.39 leaving a balance of \$363,503.81. I would like to take this opportunity to thank the VI Housing Finance Authority, Departments of Public Works and Property & Procurement, the We Grow Food organization, and this body for its assistance towards this project.

The FY 2016 capital outlay funds was earmarked to upgrade and equip the abattoirs in both districts. To date, the St. Croix abattoir is 75% completed with planned structural upgrades and installation of new equipment. On St. Thomas, we are awaiting the

finalization of engineered drawings and the development of the scope of work by the Department of Public Works for the construction of a retaining wall for flood mitigation and a security perimeter fencing. We anticipate that the call for bids will occur by mid-August.

The Veterinary Services division with help from volunteers, hosted three (3) equine training seminars with the Cornell University School of Veterinary Medicine in St. Croix and in St. Thomas. These training opportunities are administered by the Veterinary Services division and funded by the Act # 7394 or more commonly as the Racino Bill.

In May of 2013, the department was placed on High Risk Recipient designation by the USDA Agricultural Marketing Service. I am pleased to report that in March of 2016 the department was cleared of that designation paving the way for the VIDOA to be awarded approximately \$207,000.00 for the Specialty Crop Block Grant. The grant application for 2016 has been submitted and we are confident that we will receive an additional \$212,000.00 to make available to sub-grantees who qualify.

This year one of our urban and community forestry projects came to a close with the creation of a new community park in Christiansted St. Croix, the Sundial Park in Estate Tulipan Welcome. The Spring Garden Homes Association #3 cleaned up a 2-acre illegal dumpsite in the middle of their neighborhood, and made it into a beautiful community park that includes a bridge over a large gut, a pavilion with permanent seating for community association meetings, and a human sundial, in which a person's shadow on the ground tells the time of day throughout the year. The Association removed 40 large bins of garbage and debris on the site, cleaned out and rehabilitated a large gut on the property, planted 150 native trees, and installed an irrigation system for the new plantings. The Department of Agriculture held a dedication ceremony at Sundial Park on May 6, 2016. This project is exactly the kind of forestry project that the Urban and Community Forestry Program was established to support. I'd like to publically thank our Urban and Community Forestry Coordinator Mrs. Marilyn Chakroff for spearheading this program.

Pursuant to Act # 7751 which provided drought relief funding, the following items have been purchased or services rendered.

St. Croix District

1. A 4,000 gallon water truck was purchased and has been delivered to our garage. With this new 2017 Mack water truck, the VIDOA will now be able to deliver water to farmers in locations that were inaccessible by the longer 6000 gallon water tank. Because of its design, this new water truck can carry less than the maximum volume water without creating a safety hazard for the driver.
2. The VIDOA procured a new hay baler and accessories. This new baler, will augment the existing hay baler which has been the workhorse for the department for many years.
3. Our coolers and freezers are back online and have been made available to farmers for short term storage of excess or bulk produce.

4. Funds were encumbered for the activation of up to three (3) additional wells on the department grounds and for the expansion of water lines into the community gardens.
5. Eight hundred (800) pounds of high quality pasture grass seed was purchased for incorporation into a pasture improvement project for livestock farmers who suffered pasture damage as a result of last year's drought.
6. Two (2) 10,000 gallon tanks were purchased which will double the water storage capacity at the Rudolph Shulterbrandt Agricultural Complex. The VIDOA makes water available free of charge to licensed farmers who bring their own containers. We are preparing the concrete support columns for the tanks and anticipate mounting them before the end of the year.

St. Thomas District

1. There is approximately \$120,000.00 set aside for a 100,000 gallon cistern for the Estate Bordeaux farming community. Engineering drawings are currently being completed and scope of work will be prepared by the Department of Public Works.

Both Districts

1. We imported 420 large round bales of hay, and approximately 4320 bags of drought animal feed from Puerto Rico and sold at discounted rates and even at a loss to livestock farmers. This was supplemented by hundreds of locally produced bales of hay.
2. Assorted fruit trees were also purchased and sold at discounted rates.
3. The department has secured 3 weather stations one for each island to monitor rainfall and other weather parameters. A presentation of those weather stations was made last week at the Bertha C. Boschulte Middle school on St. Thomas. These weather stations will assist in the data collection process that will contribute to the analysis needed for drought declaration. Moreover, a planning meeting of local and federal agencies was held recently to prepare an agenda for a drought monitoring workshop in the Virgin Islands, tentatively set for late August.
4. Additional irrigation lines were purchased for the upgrading and expansion of the water distribution system in the community garden in St. Croix and Estate Dorothea on St. Thomas.

Workshops/Seminars

VIDOA in partnership with the US Customs and Border Protection (CBP) hosted a meeting in May with importers of meats and produce to discuss issues related to stepped up enforcement, recent violations, and import permits. This meeting also provided importers and other attendees an opportunity to interact with CBP personnel.

VIDOA in conjunction with the UVI Cooperative Extension Service (CES), hosted a Pasture Management seminar for livestock farmers in May on St. Croix. Over seventy-five (75) persons were able to increase their knowledge of the best practices for proper

pasture management. Selected attendees will have a demonstration plot developed on a portion of their farm with assistance from the UVI Experiment Station, CES and the VIDOA.

Recently, the VIDOA hosted an open house for farmers and fisherman in both districts in June. Eight (8) local and federal agencies and institutions that provide services to farmers and fishermen made formal presentation about their services. Most of the three (3) hour event was dedicated to allowing the farmers and fisherman to interact with agency representatives. Delegate to Congress Stacey Plaskett and her team also participated. One of the USDA agencies that garnered the most attention was the USDA Food and Nutrition Services that administers the SNAP program. It was revealed that \$56.5 million in federal SNAP dollars is distributed in the V.I. however, only \$7,000.00 has been redeemed from farmers in the territory. Thus this open house was relevant in that it provided an opportunity for local farmers and fisherman to sign up for and gain access to a larger portion of these federal funds.

Projects that are in-progress are as follows:

In partnership with the GIS division of the Lt. Governor's office, UVI's Conservation Data Center and the Department of Planning and Natural Resources, the VIDOA continues to build a digital map and information system of all government agricultural land. This will allow the department to have a better grasp of our farmland inventory and to develop a more efficient and effective land management and distribution strategy.

In 2014, the department secured funding from the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service to support the implementation of the Farmland Infrastructure Improvement Program. These funds will be used to enhance and expand the irrigation infrastructure of public farmlands territory-wide. This project is slated to commence in the fall of this year but due to procedural matters, the date was pushed back.

Remodeling and upgrading to the department's Coral Bay offices and surrounding buildings on St. John have commenced under a signed agreement with the American Legion and the Coral Bay Community Council. We commend these two organizations for their civic mindedness and willingness to raise funds and partner with us on this project. When finished the facility will not only be the department's offices but will also serve as a community center for Coral Bay residents.

The VIDOA and the Department of Education have commenced logistical planning for the implementation of the farm to school project. In discussions, we have identified a number of issues (primarily storage) that will limit the full implementation of the project. Consequently, we have determined that the project will have to be implemented on a small scale and ramped up over the next few years as these concerns are addressed.

Some of our challenges at this time are as follows:

On St. Thomas, a temporary alternative water distribution system will have to be engineered to minimize the challenges we have with the existing system in Estate Dorothea and Bordeaux. The alternative system and increased storage capacity would provide more availability and better distribution of the limited water resources until the federal Farmland Improvement Project is completed.

The 2013 Inspector General's report indicated that the VIDOA's practice of issuing government agriculture land without a lease, was in violation of VI law. Hence, anyone seeking government farm land must first obtain a lease. This would require the department to survey farm plots to initiate the lease process. The VIDOA currently relies on the Department of Property and Procurement for assistance in surveying farm plots. However, the DPP has very limited resources available to survey existing plots and pending request for land. Funding is needed to survey new and existing farm plots to secure leases and to come into compliance with existing law. Funding in the amount of at least \$1,000,000.00 will be needed to initiate the process for existing "permitted" farm plots. Until this requirement is met and we can obtain formal, surveyed maps that can be registered with the Lt. Governor's Office CADASTRAL Division our leasing process is stymied.

Despite the challenges, we continue to pursue the Governor's mandate for more production from agricultural lands and more locally produced food in our school lunch program and other public facilities. I still believe that our goal of having more locally grown products on the tables of Virgin Islanders is possible. We look forward to your support of the Governor's recommended FY2017 budget request for the VI Department of Agriculture.

This ends my brief testimony and my team and I are now available for dialogue on the department's budget. Thank you.