

Testimony to the 36th Legislature

Virgin Islands Department of Agriculture
Budget Hearing, Fiscal Year 2027

Submitted to: VI Legislature's Committee on Finance



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Ph.D.

Commissioner
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Government of the United States Virgin Islands

Department of Agriculture

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INTRODUCTION

Good day, Honorable Senator Novelle Francis, Chair of the Committee on Finance, other members present, and all other senators present. We are here to present and justify the Virgin Islands Department of Agriculture (VIDA) fiscal year 2027 budget request. I am Louis Emanuel Petersen, Jr., Commissioner of the VIDA. Here with me today are Assistant Commissioner Billy Abraham, Deputy Commissioner Riise Richards, Director of Administration and Management Aaron Bryan, Administrator of Fiscal and Personnel Services, Director of Agricultural Development James Henderson, Fiscal Officer Renney Charles, Financial Supervisor Jerrilyn Abraham, Director of the Abattoir Curleen Rogers, Assistant Property Manager Tafari Tzaddi, Property Inspector Jamal Rogers, Marketing Program Director Shantel Douglas, Hemp Division Director Clifford Joseph, Forest Stewardship Coordinator Mathilde Wilson, and Urban and Community Forestry Coordinator Preston Brooks, and Acting Procurement Officer Nakeitha Smith. Although not physically present, I would also like to acknowledge and express my sincere appreciation to the other hardworking men and women of the Virgin Islands Department of Agriculture, and the farmers throughout the territory.

BACKGROUND

The Virgin Islands Department of Agriculture was created pursuant to Title 3, Chapter 17, Section 291. Act Number 5265 repealed this Section and established the Department of Economic Development and Agriculture and in 1995, Act No. 5265 as amended by Act. No. 6070, abolished the Department of Economic Development and Agriculture and created two separate entities, the Department of Agriculture, and the Department of Tourism.

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Our mission is to develop, support, and promote an economically lucrative agricultural industry in the U.S. Virgin Islands while supporting farmers, consumers, and the environment. According to 3 VIC SS§ 291, our primary responsibilities include providing basic agricultural services and technical support. We fulfill our mission and responsibilities through our operational divisions, including Food Production, Marketing, Agricultural Development, Abattoir Services, Veterinary Services, Administration and Management, Forestry, Nursery and the Industrial Hemp Program.

FY 2027 BUDGET PROJECTION

The fiscal year 2027 General Fund request for the Virgin Islands Department of Agriculture is \$5,330,880 which reflects 1.54 % decrease/increase from our FY 2026 budget level. An amount of \$4,954,009 is appropriated to "Personnel" and "Fringe Benefits", while \$107,000 is allocated toward "Supplies", \$160,000 toward "Utilities" and \$107,871 toward "Other Services."

The recommended budget for VIDA also includes \$500,000 contributed to the Agriculture Revolving Fund from the Tourism Advertising Revolving Fund (Act 7767) and \$246,277 for the Industrial Hemp Commission under the Miscellaneous category. This brings the total appropriation to \$5,830,880.00 for FY 2027.

We also anticipate approximately \$212,600 in non-appropriated funds from the Agriculture Revolving Fund, generated from the sales and services of planting materials such as seeds, seedlings, equipment rentals, and land rental fees. The remaining balance of federal grants funds already awarded such as the multi-year USDA Specialty Crops Grants, Forest Legacy Grants, Urban Forestry Grants, and other grants total \$10,789,547.38. This results in a grand total of \$16,629,427.38 in funds available for FY 2027.

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RECENT MAJOR ACCOMPLISHMENT

- Agricultural Conferences - Pursuant to Act # 8306, the Department of Agriculture in partnership with the UVI School of Agriculture and the Department of Tourism successfully executed the first Virgin Islands Agricultural Caribbean Conference and the 58th Caribbean Food Crops Society Meeting along with the annual meeting of the American Phytopathological Society on St. Croix during the previous month. Approximately 200 scientists from throughout the Caribbean, North, Central, and South America in addition to local farmers and agricultural advocates benefitted from one week of scientific exchanges, discussions on best practices, local and regional developments in agriculture, and networking opportunities. The planning and execution of these joint conferences represent a major, historic accomplishment which highlighted the hard work and team spirit of the VIDA Team.

DEPARTMENTAL UPDATES

ADMINISTRATION

- During FY 26, the VIDA administrative team facilitated the salary increases (per Act 8995) and the negotiated raises of the employees who are members of the OVILU and the United Steel Workers unions. In conjunction with the Office of Collective Bargaining, we are currently working on salary increases for employees of the United Steel Workers Supervisors Labor Union. The only employees not addressed at this time are two employees who have unresolved personnel-related matters. Our team is actively working

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with the Division of Personnel and the Office of Collective Bargaining to address these issues.

- It is my pleasure to publicly applaud our 2026 Employees of the Year – Mr. Anthony Brown in the St. Croix District and Mr. Raymond Thomas in the St. Thomas/St. John District – for their exemplary work and commitment to the Department of Agriculture and its clients.
- The administrative team worked diligently with other divisional directors to hire much needed staff and fill vacant positions. These included a laborer, butcher, and forestry assistant on St. Croix and a heavy Equipment Operator, Forestry Partner Coordinator, and Nursery Assistant for the St. Thomas-St. John District.

MARKETING DIVISION

- With funding support from the USDA Specialty Crop Block Grant Programm, the VI Department of Agriculture has established a Cooperative Business Model Training Program that will offer instruction, technical assistance, and hands-on experience to 15 farmers. The goal of this initiative is to educate participating farmers about the Cooperative Business Model and its practical application for the increased production, distribution, and marketing of local crops. Project activities have already commenced with the final selection of the 15 farmers, an initial meeting with all participants and ongoing farm site assessments.
- The marketing division executed the WIC Farmers Market Nutrition Program, benefitting 1,077 recipients while the Senior Farmers Market Nutrition Program served 845

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recipients territory-wide in FY25 by providing fresh local produce to households. Both programs also benefitted and encouraged local farmers who registered with our agency and sold fresh produce to eligible clients in the community. Both programs are in progress during the current fiscal year; they provide federal funding to purchase produce from farmers.

- **National Farmers' Market Week and National Health Center Week** (August 2 – 8, 2026) As we have done in the past few years, we have partnered with farmers, the Myrah Keating Smith Community Health Center, the Department of Health and the Frederiksted Health Center to celebrate National Farmers Market Week and National Health Center Week during this month. Farmers market and health screenings events were hosted on St. Croix and St. John with the St. Thomas event planned for August 9th. These activities raise awareness of the importance of farmers markets while providing free health related testing for event attendees.

COOPERATIVE AGRICULTURAL PEST SURVEY (CAPS PROGRAM)

Through a cooperative agreement with the USDA's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service, in FY 26 the VIDA received funding to hire one staff member to:

- Continue with establishing and disseminating profiles of plant pests of regulatory significance
- Continue with establishing and maintaining a comprehensive trapping and surveying network using traps and pre-identified survey locations

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- Continue conducting outreach efforts to develop relationships with local farmers through on-farm engagements.
- Confirm and document the presence or absence of specific plant pests that impact the domestic movement of plants and plant products
- Establish early detection protocols for the introduction of foreign or exotic pests
- Safeguard the economic and environmental stability of the agricultural sector
- Perhaps the most noteworthy development was the detection of specimens of the Mediterranean Fruit Fly, an invasive species to the Virgin Islands which has serious potential, negative environmental and economic impact on our community. This invasive species has a very wide host range and can potentially devastate our agricultural sector. This prospective threat is presently under control thanks to VIDA's collaboration with our federal partners.

VETERINARY SERVICES

Our veterinarians are on the frontline of animal disease diagnostics. As a result of collaboration with our partners, a communication network has been established with all practicing USVI veterinarians for purposes of allowing a more efficient reporting of animal and human disease concerns. As a result of this communication network, import/export changes and concerns are more quickly conveyed to those who are most involved with compliance, or likely to note cases of non-compliance. These developments are important because animal diseases and human diseases often overlap.

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- Veterinary Services staff attended and successfully completed Foreign Animal Disease Diagnostic training during FY26, namely Mr. Prentice (STT) and Mr. Lake (STX). Dr. Wenger, Director of Veterinary Service, will attend an advanced training this later year.
- A general assessment of USVI territory biosecurity status was performed, resulting in the identification of significant security gaps, including weaknesses at postal service and airport/seaport access points. Plans are underway to address these biosecurity gaps.

FOOD PRODUCTION

- During FY 26, VIDA provided 6,500,267 gallons of water free of charge to farmers with production plots in the Community Gardens in Estate Lower Love, St. Croix.
- VIDA staff also delivered (using VIDA's water delivery service) 297,400 gallons of water at an extremely subsidized cost to crop and livestock farmers.
- Farmers received a total of 640,748 gallons of water at no cost from VIDA's standpipe at Estate Lower Love, St. Croix.
- With respect to the ongoing drought conditions, in addition to our water delivery service, VIDA is currently procuring livestock feed and hay which will be made available to farmers in the Territory. In conjunction with VITEMA, DPNR, and the Office of the Governor is actively working toward the issuance of a drought declaration.

FORESTRY

- **Forest Stewardship Program:** The purpose of the Forest Stewardship Program is to encourage the long-term stewardship of non-industrial private forest lands by assisting the owners of such lands to manage their forest and related resources more actively. During the upcoming fiscal year, the Forest Stewardship Coordinator will continue to assist landowners in developing Stewardship Management Plans. Currently, the Forest Stewardship Program (FSP) has seven (7) active grants. The main FSP projects are the following:

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- a) **Nursery Revegetation Project (federally funded)** – In fiscal year 2026 VIDA produced over 2,500 healthy native trees and native fruit trees such as caimito, star apple, soursop, locust/stinking toe, guavaberry, mamey apple, sugar apple, soursop, saman, almond, black olive/gregre, red manjack, lignum vitae, mahogany. These trees are being distributed to landowners/participants in the stewardship program. Two Nursery Assistants have been hired to collect seeds for propagation and provided added support for this project.
- b) **Assistance to Underserved Forest Landowners- Grafted Fruit Tree Distribution (federally funded):** We distributed 1,600 high quality and ready ready-to-plant fruit trees grafted varieties of avocado, mango, Cherry, Caimito, pomegranate, and other species). These fruits trees were distributed to 600 FSP clients and Small-Acreage landowners on all three islands. This project represents a boost to family food and economic security. We are now scaling this program through partnerships and collaboration with 2 organizations who manage a total of 38 acres focusing on establishing orchards.
- c) **Landowner Cost Share Project (federally funded)** - This major grant was awarded to assist forest stewardship clients with financial assistance to implement recommended management practices. VIDA is finalizing the hiring process for two program assistants to implement this initiative which is aimed at long term forest health and climate change mitigation.

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Forest Legacy Program (federally funded): The purpose of the Forest Legacy funds is to provide support to promote the conservation and protection in perpetuity of important forest areas of high environmental importance and are threatened by conversion to non-forest uses in The US Virgin Islands. Forest Legacy Program seeks to identify and preserve land in a forested state. By identifying landowners in priority areas who are willing to sell their property (or development rights), the program plans to preserve ecologically, historically, and culturally important, forested land. Our present efforts focus on the purchase and acquisition of 91 acres of land on Inner Brass Island. An offer for purchase was made and accepted. Our team is working diligently with the landowners and organization partners towards the completion of the purchase documents. Once the purchase process is finalized the acreage will become the property of the USVI. It is our hope that this pending acquisition will eventually become a part of the USVI Territorial Park System.

The Urban & Community Forestry (U&CF) Program (federally funded) – The goal of the Urban and Community Forestry Department is to enhance and manage the urban forests of the United States Virgin Islands. Our staff accomplished the following:

1. Expanded Urban Tree Canopy Through Large-Scale Tree Propagation and Public Distribution

Our team significantly expanded the availability of trees throughout the U.S. Virgin Islands by propagating more than 2,000 native, fruit, and ornamental trees to support reforestation, urban greening, and community resilience initiatives. The program also distributed more than 347 trees

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free of charge to residents, encouraging homeowners, schools, community organizations, and local partners to plant trees that enhance the environmental quality of the Territory.

2. Successful Administration of the Urban and Community Forestry Grant Assistance Program

The Department successfully managed the Urban and Community Forestry Grant Assistance Program by awarding funding to four community-based projects, all of which remain on schedule, within budget, and on track to achieve their proposed objectives. These projects are expanding environmental education, improving access to green spaces, supporting urban forestry initiatives, and strengthening community stewardship of natural resources throughout the Virgin Islands.

3. Expanded Urban and Community Forestry Services to the St. Thomas District

For the first time in the history of the Virgin Islands Department of Agriculture's Urban and Community Forestry Program, a dedicated Urban and Community Forestry Program Coordinator was hired to serve the St. Thomas/St. John District. This milestone has expanded the Department's ability to provide technical assistance, educational outreach, partnership development, and forestry services on St. Thomas and St. John, ensuring residents receive the same level of support and program access that has historically been available on St. Croix.

4. Expanded Technical Assistance to Tree Owners Territory-Wide

The Urban and Community Forestry Program substantially increased direct public assistance by providing technical assistance to tree owners and community members throughout the U.S.

Virgin Islands. Residents in both the St. Croix and St. Thomas/St. John districts received direct

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guidance on proper tree selection, planting techniques, tree health, maintenance, and urban forestry best management practices. This expanded technical assistance has improved public awareness, strengthened community stewardship of the Territory's urban forest resources, and increased access to professional forestry expertise.

INDUSTRIAL HEMP PROGRAM

The Hemp Division of the Department of Agriculture is responsible for establishing the standards, practices, procedures, and requirements for the production and sale of hemp and hemp products within the territory pursuant to Act # 7868. As a result of strategic planning, we have developed a public outreach and educational program that will focus on community engagement and information dissemination. This educational effort will consist of public meetings and informative presentations on the Hemp Program, its purpose, short-term, long-term goals, etc. This outreach initiative will commence during the first quarter of FY 27.

ABATTOIR DIVISION

St. Croix Abattoir

- The St. Croix abattoir facility is fully operational. One of our greatest decisions and investments was the hiring of our maintenance engineer, Mr. Gerard St. Rose. As a result, our team has been proactive and able to complete minor repairs in a timelier manner, thereby minimizing operational downtime.
- Within the past few weeks, the gutting station elevation platform failed and negatively impacted our slaughtering operations. Without this equipment we are not able to

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slaughter large livestock such as cows. Thanks to the determination and ingenuity of our staff, the machinery was restored to some level of functionality to allow operations to continue. It is among our oldest pieces of machinery. We are actively working to source a new elevation platform.

- To support ongoing professional development, the Director of the Abattoir Division participated in the Black Belt Meat Summit in Tuskegee, Alabama to receive advanced training in sustainable meat production practices while developing a network for regional collaboration.

St. Thomas Abattoir

- In the district of St. Thomas /St. John we are painfully aware of the impact of the absence of an abattoir facility on the island of St. Thomas. Since our last hearing before this committee our team has been working diligently in partnership with the Department of Public Works and the Virgin Islands Housing Finance Authority to address this concern through a facility renovation project. Following the development of a scope of work by DPW engineers Ms. Cherise Penn and Jalani Monell, the VIDA Team prepared and submitted a project proposal to the Housing Finance Authority to seek funding through the CDBG Mitigation Grant Program for approximately \$2M. Our proposal is currently being vetted at Phase I (Environmental Assessment) of the evaluation process. Of course, we are all aware, HUD has issued a suspension on funding to the Territory for program activities. Our partnership is very hopeful that this situation will be short-lived and resolved in the best interest of the Territory. Nevertheless, considering this reality, VIDA is applying for funding from two alternate sources.

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St. THOMAS/St. JOHN DISTRICT

In addition to the abattoir renovation project, other initiatives and accomplishments unique to the St. Thomas/St. John District include:

- VIDA was successful in acquiring funding through the USDA NRCS Emergency Watershed Protection Program. Three sites in Estate Bordeaux have been approved for culvert repair or replacement as a result road damages caused by Tropical Storm Ernesto on August 14, 2024. VIDA is currently working with DPW to ensure that we have our required matching contribution for this much needed initiative. We anticipate work to commence before the end of calendar year 2026.
- With the acquisition of our new 2,500 - gallon water truck, and the hiring of a heavy equipment operator, VIDA has been actively making water deliveries to farmers at a very subsidized cost. Requests for this service have increased, especially during the current dry season.
- Two 100,000 – gallon cisterns are currently under construction in Estate Bordeaux. This project is approximately 40% complete, with a projected completion date of October 31, 2026. This important ARPA funded project will significantly increase the available water resources to support increased agricultural production in the Bordeaux farmland area.
- The Bordeaux Watershed Protection and Improvement project represents an agreement between the VI Department of Agriculture and the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service's Caribbean Area Office to protect and enhance

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the Bordeaux watershed. Upon the conclusion of this multi-year project, water quantity, quality, and availability will be improved to support increased farm production in addition to significantly improved farm access roads. The planning and design phases have been completed. It is anticipated that the construct will soon commence.

OTHER ANTICIPATED EXPENSES in FY27

- Virgin Islands Agricultural Caribbean Conference - Pursuant to Act # 8306, the Department of Agriculture in partnership with the UVI School of Agriculture and the Department of Tourism looks forward to hosting the second Virgin Islands Agricultural Caribbean Conference. Based on our recent experience, the cost of planning and executing this event far exceeds the \$50,000 allotted per Act 8306. We are requesting an additional \$50,000 to ensure the success of this importance conference.
- Despite our need to hire and expand our staff, one of our limiting factors is the unavailability of adequate office space. On St. Croix the construction of our new administrative building has been hampered by the lack of matching funds to supplement the available FEMA federal funds allocated for the project. With the support of the Office of Disaster Recovery and the Office of Management and Budget funding has been identified to address the matching requirement. On the island of St. Thomas, we have longed for a more adequate, customer friendly location with additional capacity to house much needed extra staff and provide sufficient parking. While our relocation or the construction of a new office space on St. Thomas can be costly, a reasonable transitional step and option is the renovation of our property in Estate Bonne Esperance on the western side of St. Thomas. We are currently collaborating with the USDA Wildlife

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Service to repair the site with the goal of providing joint office spaces for both partners.

However, an additional \$75,000 is needed to satisfy VIDA's contribution to the joint project.

- Funding in the amount of \$45,000 is also needed for the successful operations of the Virgin Islands Conservation District (VICD), which is an entity that serves as a liaison between our agency and the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service. Supporting and enabling the VICD to function to maximum capacity will provide access and opportunities to increased federal funds and the continued enhancement of critical farmland infrastructure.

LOOKING FORWARD

As we bring closure to the current fiscal year our team in partnership with the Office of the Governor, the National Cooperative Bank Association, and the Federation of Southern Cooperatives will be hosting a three-day engagement with stakeholders to discuss and explore the interest, challenges, and opportunities associated with the use of the Cooperative Business Model for economic development in the USVI.

As we look forward to FY27, we focus on a strategic approach to modernizing and improving our overall operations, and the efficiency and effectiveness of our programs and services. We also look forward to hiring adequate, quality staff to execute the mission of the Department of Agriculture along with enrolling staff in certified training programs. Our ideal complement of staff would include a new Division of Enforcement and Animal Control Officers).

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Another aspect of the new paradigm and modernization plan involves working closely with our farmers to enhance their business approach by developing profitable business models. This undertaking will be accomplished in conjunction with the UVI School of Agriculture and students majoring in business and agriculture through internship projects.

An important component of our forward movement to modernize our operations is the No Pound Left Behind Campaign. The goal of this initiative is to work closely with crop and livestock producers to collect production and sales data which would be established in a digital database, analyzed and published.

Pursuant to Act 6836 licensed farmers are required to submit annual production records to VIDA by June 30th each year. Subsequently, VIDA is mandated to compile and present the production data to the Legislature of the Virgin Islands each year. Today, I am proud to share with you – for the first time since the passing of Act 6836 - a summarized graphic report of the harvest data submitted by the farming community on St. Croix for production year 2023.

But before I share this information, allow me to introduce and recognize Ms. Thalia Stanley (UVI agricultural student), Mr. Rza Denbow (Clarkson University student), and Ms. Lynesia Richards (VIDA Public Information Officer) who represent a dynamic trio of young talent who are committed to improving and modernizing our agency and who are at the heart of this effort. We call them our Elite Team. Additionally, the Elite Team has already begun to upgrade and improve our social media and online presence, and the development of a listserv for the farming community. Our Facebook page and websites were recently restored thanks to this team.

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(SHOW SLIDE) This information and these young adults represent the future of Virgin Islands agriculture. This is literally the game changer that we need to shift the current paradigm toward success.

In addition to their efforts, the Department of Agriculture is an integral part of a forward-thinking collaboration of public and private sector partners that seeks to elevate the agricultural sector through technology and the development of a multifaceted and multipurpose dashboard of local agricultural data.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

In closing we extend our appreciation to the members of this committee and the entire 36th Legislature of the Virgin Islands of the United States for your support and the opportunity to present our FY 2027 budget request. We also express sincere appreciation to our farming clientele throughout the Virgin Islands for their tireless effort, relentlessness, and support. We acknowledge and thank our honorable Governor and Lieutenant Governor as well as the entire Bryan-Roach administrative team for their unwavering support of Virgin Islands Department of Agriculture. Finally, we would like to close by also acknowledging our hard-working VIDA staff for their support, sacrifices, and dedication to our agency, our clients, and our mission.