

Testimony to the 35th Legislature's Committee on Economic Development and Agriculture



Louis E. Petersen, Jr.

Ph.D.

Commissioner Nominee

September 13, 2023

Government of the United States Virgin Islands
Department of Agriculture

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION2

BACKGROUND2

DEPARTMENTAL VACANCIES.....3

INVENTORY AND CONDITION OF EQUIPMENT.....4

STATUS UPDATE ON LEASE AGREEMENTS FOR FARMERS.....5

STATUS UPDATE ON GRANTS ISSUED TO THE VIDA6

STATUS UPDATE ON ST. CROIX ABATTOIR.....8

LIST OF LICENSED FARMERS9

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS9

ATTACHMENTS.....

A. Vacancy Listing

B. Inventory and condition of Equipment

C. Master Land Lease Listing.....

D. Federal Grants Listing.....

E. Licensed Farmer Listing.....

Government of the United States Virgin Islands
Department of Agriculture

INTRODUCTION

Good day, Honorable Senators – Chairperson, Senator Javan James, members of the Committee on Economic Development and Agriculture, and other senators present. We are here to present testimony in response to your letter of August 24, 2023, regarding updates about the Department of Agriculture’s operations. I am Louis Emanuel Petersen, Jr., Commissioner Nominee of the VIDA. Here with me today are Assistant Commissioner, Diana Collingwood, Deputy Commissioner Riise Richards, Director of Administration and Management Aaron Bryan, and Financial Supervisor Jerrilyn Abraham. If available via Teams, Marketing Program Assistant Shantel Douglas, NACD Technical Assistance Coordinator Gracia Lettsome, Forest Stewardship Coordinator Mathilde Wilson, and Urban and Community Coordinator Akil Andrews. Although not physically present, we would like to acknowledge and express my sincere appreciation to the rest of the 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 Act Number 5265 repealed this Section and established the Department of Economic Development and Agriculture and in 1995, Act No. 5265 as amended by Act.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.

Government of the United States Virgin Islands
Department of Agriculture

The mission of our agency 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; creating activities and opportunities for the marketing and production of farm produce; inspecting and regulating agricultural products; investigating and regulating insect, animal, and plant diseases and environmental protection laws; supervising coordination, cooperation, and compliance in federally aided or sponsored agricultural programs; and advocating or disseminating policies, rules, and regulations that allow for the effective exercise of our powers and duties in our responsibility to the Territory's community and farmers. We fulfill our mission and responsibilities through our operational divisions, including Food Production; Marketing; Agricultural Development; Abattoir Services; Veterinary Services; Administration and Management; Forestry; and the Industrial Hemp Program.

DEPARTMENTAL VACANCIES

The Department of Agriculture currently has 20 vacant positions which cover a wide range of critical needs of the agency across all divisional units. We are actively and strategically taking steps to fill all vacancies, including the development of the PRFs, and posting of the vacancies. Our newest employee, the Public Information Officer, was just onboarded two weeks ago. As a part of our plan, we are now preparing to fill vacancies for heavy equipment operators, laborers, and the maintenance engineer. In addition to filling the critical vacant positions, our management team will also increase entry level salaries for some positions while simultaneously adjusting salaries for staff already filling the same positions by utilizing a portion of our increased funding for FY 2024 pursuant to Act # 8259 and savings from two positions which are less critical at this

Government of the United States Virgin Islands
Department of Agriculture

time. These steps are extremely important to attract trained, skilled applicants and improve staff morale. We are determined to address the compensation needs of the VIDA Team through a methodical approach on a year-to-year basis. A complete list of our vacancies is provided in Attachment A.

INVENTORY AND CONDITION OF EQUIPMENT

The Department of Agriculture houses an inventory of heavy equipment which is used in support of farmers, to assist other agencies, and provide emergency response assistance as necessary. Therefore, it is critical for the VIDA to always maintain a fully functional fleet of heavy equipment. Attachment B provides a listing of our machinery and their condition at present. In some cases, there is a need for minor repairs while some equipment requires major upkeep. In other instances, our mechanics recommend the replacement of derelict equipment.

On St. Croix, besides routine repairs, the most urgent need is the procurement of two additional tractors and a compliment of tractor implements to increase our level of support to farmers and agricultural productivity. Of course, this increase in inventory must be accompanied by an increase in the number of heavy equipment operators.

On St. Thomas, repair work is in progress for all three machines in our inventory. We also possess a water truck which was acquired from the Virgin Islands Fire Service a few years ago. However, due to the age of the truck, it requires constant repair work and the replacement of parts. Therefore, we have a critical need for a new water truck. We have encumbered funds for the acquisition of a new truck which is currently being fabricated, specifically for the terrain of St. Thomas. Although \$160,000.00 was initially allocated for this purchase through Act # 8590

Government of the United States Virgin Islands
Department of Agriculture

in 2022, the current cost is now \$210,000. In addition, our immediate machinery needs include a skid steer and associated implements to conduct a wide range of tasks, including land preparation for farmers.

STATUS UPDATE ON LEASE AGREEMENTS FOR FARMERS

The VIDA has a total of thirty-eight (38) expired lease agreements for farmers on St. Thomas and nine (9) for farmers on St. Croix. Each agreement has been evaluated on a case-by-case basis for consideration of its renewal. Some have been approved for renewal on both St. Thomas and St. Croix. These renewals have been initiated by the VIDA to be processed. However, most of these packages are incomplete as we await supporting documents from farmers, including farmers' licenses, and letters expressing a "Notice of Intent to Exercise Renewal Option" for our files and as required by the terms of the lease agreement. Of the remaining lease agreements some will not be renewed for lack of productivity and/or compliance with the terms of the agreement. The remaining leases will require meetings with the lessees to discuss adjustments to the terms of their lease agreements and the implementation of a probationary period.

In addition, we have prepared packages for lease agreements on St. Croix and St. Thomas.

Again, we are awaiting supporting documents from farmers in most cases.

The final category of farmer applicants includes those for whom agreements cannot be initiated due to the lack of a survey map for the property under consideration for leasing. We are working with the Office of the Governor to secure funding for those parcels to be surveyed.

Regarding the issue of incomplete lease agreement packages and non-compliance matters, the VIDA is actively addressing these concerns through an outreach and educational approach with

Government of the United States Virgin Islands
Department of Agriculture

the support of our Property Management Team which is a relatively new unit of the VIDA. The management team is making great strides in this effort.

Attachment C provides information regarding the lease agreements managed by the VIDA.

STATUS UPDATE ON GRANTS ISSUED TO THE VIDA

The Department of Agriculture is currently implementing a wide range of grant funded projects through our Marketing, Administrative, Veterinary Service, and Forestry Divisions. In the Marketing area, the WIC Farmers' Market Nutrition Program connects young mothers and their families with farmers who provide them with fresh farm products.

The program also provides payments to participating farmers through a coupon distribution system. Through the Specialty Crop Block Grant Program, the Back Yard Farmers Development Project assists participants in developing their backyard gardens. A portion of these funds are sub-awarded to the UVI School of Agriculture to support projects that address the needs of local farmers.

Some of the grant funding received by the Veterinary Services Division is used for the purpose of supporting local surveillance efforts to monitor and control the spread of the Bont Tick, an economically important pest on cattle. As a matter of fact, some tick specimens were recently identified on one of the farms on St. Croix. Our staff are working very diligently to prevent the spread of this pest. Other funding is used to establish and implement disease traceability protocols.

Government of the United States Virgin Islands
Department of Agriculture

The Administrative Team manages FEMA grant funds that have been secured for the purpose of constructing the new VIDA Administration Building, and the repair of damaged livestock enclosures.

As a part of the Farm and Ranch Stress Assistance Network, the VIDA manages funds to implement local initiatives to provide education and address farmers' needs regarding stress factors.

Funds received from the National Association of Conservation Districts are used for training and to promote educational projects that advance the conservation of our natural resources. The remainder of the funding received from the Department of Interior is being used to improve the water distribution system for farmers in Estate Bordeaux.

The Forestry Division has three subsections – Urban and Community Forestry, Forest Legacy, and Forest Stewardship. The funds received through Urban and Community Forestry are used to support projects that promote education and awareness of the importance and care of trees in urban areas. Recent projects have included tree identification and signage projects, a nature trail development initiative, and school-based initiatives to target the student population. The Forest Legacy funds can be used for the purpose of purchasing real property. The Forest Stewardship Program funds are used for the purpose of developing management plans for the care and preservation of the natural forests of the territory.

FEMA funding supports a range of project needs, including the establishment of a temporary modular office space for VIDA staff on St. John, the repair of a farm access road in Estate Dorothea (St. Thomas), the repair of equipment and the St. John administrative office, repairs to

Government of the United States Virgin Islands
Department of Agriculture

the Bordeaux Farmers' Market, and the fencing, greenhouse, and ancillary building in Estate Dorothea (St. Thomas). These projects resulted from damage caused by the 2017 hurricanes.

STATUS UPDATE ON ST. CROIX ABATTOIR

The St. Croix abattoir is our single most important facility at the VIDA. This structure and its equipment are seriously outdated and in dire need of refurbishing. The renovation, which is in progress, targets the three routine weak points of the system – the boiler, chill room, and the rumping station. Critical component parts have been replaced in the boiler which was just purchased few years old. A new compressor has been installed in the chill room. The installation is approximately 90% complete. We have initiated the process of procuring a new rumping station while repair work is in progress on the current unit. As a part of its routine USDA-mandated maintenance operations, the abattoir facility on St. Croix is currently closed for a two-week period for repairs, maintenance, and servicing of all equipment. We are hopeful that upon re-opening, the abattoir will be operating at full capacity.

In the case of the St. Thomas abattoir, demolition work will commence once the as-built survey is completed, and the cost of demolition is determined. We are working with the Office of the Governor to identify a source of funding for the purchase of the new mobile abattoir facility which will be located on St. Thomas.

LIST OF LICENSED FARMERS

Based on the information received from the DLCA as of August 25, 2023, there is currently a total of 251 licensed farmers in the territory, 7 on St. John, 204 on St. Croix, and 40 on St.

Government of the United States Virgin Islands
Department of Agriculture

Thomas. It is important to note that based on our recent review of the list of licensed farmers, some of the license holders are home gardeners who produce fruits and vegetables for domestic consumption, but not commercially. While we strongly encourage and support all home gardening efforts, licenses should be awarded to commercial producers of crop, livestock, honey, and other commodities. Based on this, the VIDA has established an internal policy to notify and educate all home gardeners regarding our guidelines for license renewal. As a part of this process, all home gardeners who currently have a farmer's license will have a one-year period to transition to a commercial production operation for their licenses to be reissued. A complete list of the current licensees is provided as Attachment E.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I express our heartfelt appreciation to you, Senator James, on behalf of the VIDA Team, for your constant inquiries and demonstrated commitment to our agency. Furthermore, I express our appreciation to all senators present and the Senate's Committee on Economic Development and Agriculture.

We are thankful to all of you for your on-going encouragement, monetary support, and the opportunity to share information about our needs and those of our clients – the Virgin Islands farmers. We also acknowledge and thank our honorable Governor and Lieutenant Governor as well as the entire Bryan-Roach administration for their leadership and unwavering support of Virgin Islands Department of Agriculture. We once again express our gratitude to our hard-working VIDA staff for their support, sacrifices, and tireless efforts and dedication to our community in general and our farmers in particular.

Government of the United States Virgin Islands
Department of Agriculture

In closing I issue both a reminder and a challenge - a reminder that we have an approved USVI Agriculture Plan which will require resources and hard work to implement. The challenge is for us to remain focused and committed to the task. We must succeed for the benefit of the present and future generations of Virgin Islanders.

Senators, this concludes my testimony on behalf of the Virgin Islands Department of Agriculture.