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**Department of Agriculture**



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**Testimony Delivered to the Committee on Economic Development and  
Agriculture  
36th Legislature of the Virgin Islands**

**April 10, 2026**

Good afternoon, Senator Hubert Frederick, Chairman of the Committee on Economic Development and Agriculture and all other senators present. My name is Louis E. Petersen, Jr., Commissioner of the Virgin Islands Department of Agriculture (VIDA). I am here today with other members of our team. In response to your letter of invitation, we are here to highlight and share information regarding 1) **Current Agricultural Initiatives and Economic Impacts**, 2) **Challenges Affecting Production, Land Access, and Marketing**, and 3) **Recommendations to Strengthen Agriculture's Contribution to USVI Sustainable Development**. We will also provide an update regarding the upcoming 2026 Virgin Islands Caribbean Agricultural Conference.

**Current Agricultural Initiatives and Economic Impacts**

- **Fruit Orchard Project** – The purpose of this initiative is to establish stands or orchards of fruit bearing trees on farms and elsewhere throughout the Territory, thereby increasing food production, and contributing to economic profit for producers. The Fruit Orchard Project was launched during the month of December 2025 through the distribution of 2,500 native and fruit trees at no cost to residents on St. Thomas, St. Croix, and St. John. As a result of a grant award of \$500,000 to VIDA from the U.S. Forest Service, native and fruit trees were purchased from local farmers and plant nurseries as well as from sources outside of the Territory. The distribution included avocado, mango, breadfruit, sugar apple, West Indian Cherry, carambola, star fruit and more. Undoubtedly, this investment will have a potential, long-term health and economic impact – not only on the agricultural sector, but the community in general. Referencing the distributed avocado trees as an example of this impact, VIDA issued enough trees to residents to

comprise a 5-acre orchard of trees upon maturity. VIDA has already placed orders for additional trees in preparation for future distributions.

- **Bordeaux Cistern Construction Project** – The goal of this infrastructure improvement project is to construct two 100,800-gallon capacity cisterns on the Estate Bordeaux farmland on St. Thomas to increase water storage to support increased agricultural production and enhanced economic impact for farmers. The construction of one cistern is 30% complete while ground was broken for the second cistern three weeks ago. We look forward to the completion of this important ARPA-funded project within the next few months. We are thankful to the Office of the Governor for making available funding in the amount of \$900,000 for this project.
- **VIDA Marketing Programs** – Our agency continued to implement its WIC Farmers Market Nutrition Program and Senior Farmers Market Nutrition Program for the benefit of farmers, WIC-eligible residents and seniors throughout the Territory. During FY 2025 a total of 1,922 residents received fresh, locally grown farm produce while 39 farmers were issued payments through these federally funded programs. Both marketing programs continue to provide positive health and economic impacts on the Virgin Islands community. During FY 2025 a total award of \$94,083.00 was awarded to VIDA for these marketing initiatives.
- **Cooperative Business Model Training** – In support of the Territorial Agriculture Plan, VIDA recently launched a training program entitled “The Use of the Cooperative Business Model as a Tool for the Increased Production and Marketing of Specialty Crops in the USVI.” The first phase of this project will provide education on the Cooperative Business Model while the second phase will feature a practical application of the model through collective production and marketing. Farmers are encouraged to apply to participate in this program which has a deadline date of April 13, 2026, for accepting applications. This initiative is administered through VIDA’s Marketing Division and represents one of two projects funded by a grant award of \$246,902.05 from the USDA Agricultural Marketing Service. The grant proceeds will enable VIDA to provide incentives to participating farmers and compensate the Federation of Southern Cooperatives – our primary partner who will be responsible for the business model training. One of the main long term,



economic benefits to participating farmers is that VIDA will facilitate the business arrangements to ensure a market for all crops produced.

- **Equipment Purchases** – With the support of ARPA funding from in the amount of \$1.3 M from the Office of the Governor, the purchase of several new pieces of equipment is in progress. These include, but are not limited to replacement vehicles, a flatbed trailer, tractors, compact trac loaders, and associated implements such as trenchers, rakes, mulchers, brush cutters, harrow, plows, tillers, mowers, a fork attachment, and miscellaneous ground maintenance tools and equipment. Once these items are procured, VIDA will be better equipped and prepared to provide various services to our clients and maintained our office grounds more effectively. The goal of this effort is to replace and upgrade our current fleet of machinery, heavy equipment and associated implements. From an economic perspective, once these items are in VIDA’s inventory, the reliable delivery of services will generate increased income for our agency while maximizing production efficiency and profitability for producers.
- **St. Croix Abattoir Upgrades and Training** – The St. Croix Abattoir is undergoing a steady, gradual transition through the acquisition and replacement of outdated and inadequate equipment and machinery. During the past eighteen months some new equipment were purchased and installed, including a boiler, rumping station, and a hoist. Major repairs were completed on the roof and the entire steam pipe system and insulation were replaced during the same period of time. Through ARPA funding in the amount of \$ 170,00 provided by the Office of the Governor, requisitions have been submitted for the procurement of additional equipment, including a band saw, an offal processor, a scalding and dehairing machine, an air compressor, an exhaust fan, and a live weight scale. The acquisition and installation of this equipment will result in greater operational efficiency and the offering of new value-added products, thereby enhancing profitability for livestock farmers. To further enhance its capacity to deliver services, the director of the Abattoir Division will be attending a professional development activity next week.



- **St. Thomas Abattoir Renovation Project** – One of our biggest, on-going challenges is the lack of an abattoir facility in the St. Thomas/St. John District. In response to this need, our team has completed and submitted an application to the Virgin Islands Housing Finance Authority's (VIHFA) Community Development Block Grant for Mitigation Funding for Infrastructure and Public Facilities. Funding has been requested in the amount of \$2,000,000 for the St. Thomas Abattoir Renovation Project. Our team is very thankful to DPW Commissioner Derek Gabriel and his team of engineers, namely Ms. Cherise Penn and Mr. Jalani Monell, for their invaluable support and assistance in developing the scope of work needed for the application process. In addition, VIDA will have access to \$518,613.26 in insurance funds for the renovations. Our application has received an initial review and is expected to advance through the workflow. We have been notified that HUD requires an environmental assessment as a part of the process which can take as many as 120 days to be completed. Based on the current timeline discussed with our team, we are hopeful that this project will commence in the fourth quarter of 2026 to address the needs of livestock farmers in the district of St. Thomas/St. John.
- **Pest Survey and Monitoring** – Through our Cooperative Agricultural Pest Survey (CAPS) Program, our joint surveillance team was successful in detecting the presence of an invasive and potentially devastating pest, the Mediterranean Fruit Fly, on the island of St. Croix earlier this year. The introduction of this pest has caused major economic losses in agricultural sectors in some parts of the world. Except for Hawaii, the pest is not permanently established in the United States. It has a very wide host range, including many crops grown in the Territory, including mangos, avocados, sugar apple soursop, breadfruit, carambola, Kenip, banana, pumpkins, tamarind, peppers and much more. Such a threat can pose a risk to other regional jurisdictions and the American agricultural industry.

Our joint team represents staff of the USDA Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS) and one VIDA employee whose salary is funded through our cooperative agreement with APHIS. Although no recent or subsequent findings of the pest have been documented, VIDA is currently promoting awareness on the local level to inform residents of the potential threat, negative local impact, and their role in controlling the introduction and spread of invasive species.



- **Estate Bordeaux Irrigation Watershed Enhancement Project** – Through a collaborative agreement between the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service and the Virgin Islands Department of Agriculture, a major project is in progress to increase water resources, address drainage concerns, and improve road access for farmers in the Estate Bordeaux farmland area of St. Thomas. The project was slowed during the shut down of the federal government, but progress has been resumed. This joint effort represents an infrastructural investment which will result in increased capacity for food production and transport across upgraded roads. Presently, the road surfaces are unstable and vulnerable to the impact of heavy rainfalls. A public meeting was held on January 21, 2026, to share project updates. The design phase has been completed to be followed by the engineering stage. This multi-year project is scheduled for completion in 2030. Upon completion, we anticipate increased production and economic profitability due to the overall infrastructural enhancements.
- **St. Thomas Plant Nursery** – Having completed the final inspection of this FEMA funded repair project and new benches constructed and painted by VIDA’s skilful staff, our plant nursery on St. Thomas will be ready to serve our clients by June of this year.
- **Virgin Islands Agricultural Caribbean Conference** - I am pleased to report that our organizing committee has been diligently working to plan and execute the Virgin Islands Caribbean Agricultural Conference jointly with the annual Caribbean Food Crops Society Conference which will be held on St. Croix July 12 – 17, 2026. Our planning committee consists of representatives from the University of the Virgin Islands (UVI) School of Agriculture, the Department of Tourism, and the Department of Agriculture. We are inviting off-island guests to arrive in time to enjoy the annual Mango Mele and Tropical Fruits Festival which will be held on July 12, 2026. Under the theme of “Increasing Food Security in the Caribbean Through Innovative Agriculture,” the opening session will commence on the day (Monday July 13th) following the festival.

The conference agenda will consist of a welcome reception, opening and technical sessions poster exhibits, a youth in agriculture segment, an awards banquet, and field trips, and possibly a farmers’ forum. For the local conference, topic areas will include pest management, modern innovations in agriculture, agriculture as a



business, self empowerment strategies for small farmers, and agritourism in accordance with Act 8306.

Pursuant to Act 8306 the organizing committee anticipates receiving the sum of \$50,000 from the Department of Tourism to support our planning efforts. Although our fund-raising efforts are ongoing, we have not yet secured any major sponsors. For this reason, we are open to receiving any additional support that the 36th Legislature can provide. The UVI School of Agriculture and the Department of Agriculture have already pledged monetary support to effectively execute the joint meetings.

- **Local Farm and Food Council** - In my capacity as co-chair (along with UVI President Dr. Safiyah George) of the Local Farm and Food Council, I meet with other council members on a biweekly basis to fulfill the mandates of the Plan. On behalf of our council members, I extend sincere appreciation to you, your staff, Senator Novelle Francis and the Post Audit Division staff for your support, invaluable assistance, and efforts in working with us to identify and secure funding for our continued operations. Since our last appearance before this committee, one of our most impactful accomplishments was the Territorial Agriculture Plan (TAP) Grant Writing Academy initiative – a three-part series of training efforts to build local capacity to seek and manage grant funded opportunities in the field of agriculture. Through virtual and in-person sessions, farmers, fishermen, representatives from local organizations, and other interested persons gained insight regarding the identification of funding sources, the preparation of successful grant proposals, and other financial options such as loans.

### **Challenges Affecting Production, Land Access, and Marketing**

- Based on the information received from the DLCA there is currently a total of 251 licensed farmers in the territory, 7 on St. John, 204 on St. Croix, and 40 on St. Thomas.
- Regarding farmers who occupy or lease public acreages for farm production, production is sometimes hampered by poor farmland infrastructure, limited personal resources, and/or lack of a business plan or model to ensure success. Based on these needs, VIDA has implemented the Farmland Infrastructure Improvement Program, directed farmers to technical and financial assistance programs, and whenever



possible, we have budgeted for incentives for farmers who participate in our grant funded projects.

- In other cases, land access has been limited by VIDA's inability to lease unsurveyed parcels of land. For this reason, VIDA has met with a land surveyor who will be contracted, using local funds, through the Department of Property and Procurement to subdivide two-acre parcels for crop production. Once the survey work is completed and the new maps properly recorded, VIDA will proceed with initiating lease agreements for new clients.
- Additional acreages will also become available for new viable candidates when VIDA completes its action to remove all non-productive clients from their respective plots. Having completed the assessment phase for all farm plots, VIDA is actively engaging in outreach with all clients regarding the assessment outcomes and final decisions. This important process has proven to be slow and tedious, even with clients who are in good standing. In many cases, productive clients for whom leases will be renewed are deficient with respect to records and documentation.
- With respect to marketing, most clients have dedicated markets for their products. However, VIDA actively provides further outlets for marketing through its WIC Farmers Market Nutrition Program and Senior Farmers Market Nutrition Program.

## **Recommendations to Strengthen Agriculture's Contribution to USVI Sustainable Development**

- **Increase staff numbers and professional capacity** – The lack of an adequate workforce continues to hamper both the effectiveness and efficiency of our operations and delivery of services. One very clear example of this deficiency is our challenge in keeping pace with job orders or work requests from farmers due to a limited number of heavy equipment operators or an inadequate number of mechanics to efficiently service and repair our fleet of heavy equipment. In some cases, the issue is not merely a case of staff numbers, but a case of limited expertise in some areas (e.g. grant writing, pathology, entomology, engineering) of



need. With the support of the Office of the Governor and this body, we look forward to addressing these concerns.

I am pleased to share that during the past 12 months we have made progress, by hiring an additional heavy equipment operator and an industrial engineer by utilizing our regular annual allotment. In the current fiscal year, we have already hired an additional butcher to enhance our operations at the St. Croix abattoir.

- **Increase staff salaries** – Our management team is pleased to report that the cost proposal for the minimum salary and OVILU negotiated raise issues has been submitted to OMB for approval. At present we are finalizing a salary increase proposal for our staff in the exempt category. These increases will be included as a part of VIDA’s FY 27 budget request. Collectively, these salary increases are anticipated to have a positive impact on staff moral and productivity.
- **Replacement of Outdated and aged equipment** - Clear examples of this deficiency includes our challenge in keeping pace with job orders or work requests from farmers due to equipment failure, equipment down time and frequent repairs to our inventory. As mentioned previously, with the support of ARPA funds from the Office of the Governor, we are currently making a major purchase of heavy equipment, attachments and other machinery to address this need.
- **Develop Data-Driven and Viable Agrotourism Initiatives** – Our management team is methodically increasing VIDA’s capacity to function as a data collecting/data-driven agency that makes all planning and strategic decisions based on a sound database. Through our outreach efforts we have been encouraging our farming clientele to utilize the same approach in their business operations to make decisions that are economically, environmentally, and socially sound (i.e sustainable). Our management team is applying this decision-making process to potential agrotourism initiatives which can contribute meaningfully to sustainable development in the USVI. Pursuant to this approach, we have applied for two grant opportunities to implement agrotourism projects in the USVI. One project was not funded, but we have been asked to resubmit our proposal during the next cycle of funding. We are awaiting a response regarding our second proposal. A properly planned and strategic merger between our agricultural and tourism sectors can contribute significantly to the sustainable development of the USVI.



The data to be collected from the “The Use of the Cooperative Business Model as a Tool for the Increased Production and Marketing of Specialty Crops in the USVI” project will be instrumental in making strategic decisions that will contribute to a more productive and profitable agricultural sector that better supports the sustainable development of the Territory.

In closing, I express sincere appreciation to the offices of the Governor and Lieutenant Governor for supporting our agency’s programs and projects. On behalf of the VIDA Team, thank you Senator Fredericks, other members of the committee and the other members of the 36th Legislature for the opportunity to share our testimony. We look forward to your continued support and engagement regarding the growth and development of the agricultural sector.

Submitted by: Louis E. Petersen, Jr. Ph.D  
Commissioner, Department of Agriculture

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