

TESTIMONY

**COMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT &
AGRICULTURE**

April 13, 2025

By
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Good morning, Senator Hubert L. Frederick, Chair of the Committee on Economic Development and Agriculture, distinguished Members of the committee and the 36th Legislature of the Virgin Islands, and a blessed good morning to the resilient and dedicated people of the Virgin Islands.

It is both an honour and a responsibility to appear before this Committee to provide testimony on the current state of agriculture in our territory. We are grateful for the opportunity to share our experiences, observations, and recommendations as we collectively examine the policies, programs, and practices shaping the future of Virgin Islands agriculture.

Our testimony is offered with the hope that it will serve as a valuable resource in evaluating the territory's commitment to supporting its local farmers, improving food security, and fostering a more sustainable and self-reliant agricultural sector. It is through these discussions that we can illuminate the challenges faced by our farmers while also highlighting opportunities for transformative growth and development.

In response to the invitation extended by this Committee, our testimony has been carefully organized around the key questions outlined in your correspondence. Where appropriate, we have combined related topics to ensure clarity, coherence, and a more comprehensive understanding of the issues at hand. In addition to addressing the Committee's inquiries, we have included a candid overview of the current conditions affecting our agricultural sector—conditions that demand urgent attention and thoughtful intervention. Supporting documentation has also been provided to substantiate our observations, reinforce our proposals, and offer context to the challenges and opportunities before us. We look forward to engaging in a constructive and solution-oriented dialogue, with the aim of contributing practical insights that can help shape informed policy and meaningful legislative action for the advancement of agriculture and the well-being of the broader Virgin Islands community.

That said, we would be remiss if we did not express a deep and growing concern that must be addressed with urgency. We sincerely hope that today's hearing does not follow the same pattern as previous hearings—where testimony is respectfully heard, but no substantive action is taken. Too often, the insights and calls to action shared by those on the frontlines of agriculture go unanswered, with no clear timeline for implementation, no structured plan for execution, and a notable absence of sustained oversight.

We urge this Committee and the Legislature as a whole to break that cycle. Let this hearing be a turning point—where recommendations are not only acknowledged but followed by decisive steps, measurable outcomes, and consistent accountability. The agricultural sector, and the people of the Virgin Islands who depend on it, deserve nothing less.

The Question ask are the following with answer and solutions:

Key Challenges and Opportunities Facing Farmers and Agricultural Businesses in the Virgin Islands: The impact of existing policies and regulations on your ability to farm, grow, and distribute products effectively: Suggestions for legislative initiatives or government support that would help strengthen the local farming industry:

One of the most significant challenges facing farmers and agricultural businesses in the Virgin Islands is the lack of execution and enforcement of Title 3 and Title 7 of the Virgin Islands Code. These titles form the legal foundation for the development of the agricultural industry; however, they have not been implemented to their fullest extent.

While certain provisions of these laws, particularly those concerning the responsibilities of farmers such as licensing, tax filing, and annual harvest reporting—are enforced, the government has failed to fulfill its corresponding obligations. Specifically, there has been no meaningful executive action to establish the infrastructure, technical assistance, or services required to support the growth and development of a viable agricultural economy. This neglect undermines the full realization of the opportunities embedded in the laws themselves.

The Role of the University of the Virgin Islands as a Land-Grant Institution

As the designated land-grant institution for the territory, the University of the Virgin Islands (UVI) carries a legal and moral responsibility to support agricultural advancement through research, education, and community outreach. However, over the past 15 years, UVI has fallen short of fulfilling its extension duties. The university's research efforts have largely remained confined to controlled environments on campus, with minimal or no practical application or visibility in the broader farming community. There has been a noticeable absence of off-farm research initiatives, field demonstrations, or direct engagement with farmers to translate scientific findings into real-world agricultural solutions. This disconnect limits the dissemination of valuable knowledge and innovations that could strengthen productivity, sustainability, and resilience across the Virgin Islands' agricultural sector. For UVI to effectively contribute to the development of a thriving local food system, it must recommit to its land-grant mission and become an active partner in agricultural outreach and education.

The Impact of Existing Policies and Regulations

Title 3, Chapter 17 paragraph 290 - 293 of the VI Code establishes the Department of Agriculture and outlines the powers and duties of the Commissioner. These include, but are not limited to:

1. Promoting, administering, and enforcing the agricultural programs defined under Title 7.
2. Supporting effective relationships and services among food producers, distributors, and consumers.
3. Maintaining reliable data on agricultural production costs and marketing trends.
4. Supervising and regulating grain warehouses, conservation programs, extension services, experimental stations, and farms.
5. Inspecting and regulating slaughterhouses, markets, farms, orchards, plant nurseries, and imported produce.
6. Overseeing the manufacture, sale, and distribution of fertilizers.
7. Enforcing laws concerning the grading, packaging, storage, and sale of local agricultural products.
8. Investigating plant and insect diseases.
9. Administering aquaculture regulations.

10. Coordinating and cooperating in federally sponsored agricultural programs and ensuring compliance with federal standards.

While these mandates provide a roadmap for agricultural development, they cannot be realized through the mere appointment of a Commissioner and Assistant. A fully staffed, well-resourced department is essential to carry out these duties effectively. Yet, despite the existence of this legal structure, the government's failure to act on its obligations has rendered the Department of Agriculture largely dysfunctional.

Title 7 complements **Title 3** by outlining the foundational infrastructure, planning, and investment needed to develop agribusiness, strengthen the local food economy, and drive agricultural growth. It clearly directs how opportunities in agriculture can be cultivated and sustained through coordinated planning, targeted investment, and structured development. When implemented in tandem with a comprehensive territorial agricultural plan and supported by a fully operational Department of Agriculture, these laws offer a clear pathway to building a resilient, food-secure Virgin Islands. They provide the legal and strategic framework for expanding Agri-development, cultivating agribusiness, and advancing food sovereignty and security throughout the territory.

However, the consistent failure to execute and invest in these legislative mandates has created a bottleneck that severely limits opportunities for farmers and agricultural entrepreneurs. This failure has not only contributed to the stagnation of farming operations, but it has also stifled the growth of agritourism and agribusiness—further deepening the territory's dependence on imported food. The critical issue is not simply that farmers are struggling; the more urgent question is: **why are they not progressing?** The answer lies in a follow-up question and a firm observation: **How can they progress, or be expected to thrive, when the very agency tasked with fostering agricultural development has failed in its core responsibility and remains fundamentally dysfunctional?**

Until the Virgin Islands Government honors its legal obligations and makes real, sustained investments in the operational capacity of its agricultural institutions, it is unrealistic—and even unreasonable—to expect the farming sector, agribusinesses, agritourism ventures, or any agricultural enterprise in the territory to reach their full potential.

Recommendations for Legislative Initiatives and Government Support

To reverse the stagnation and catalyze growth in the local farming sector, the Virgin Islands Government must:

1. **Prioritize Full Implementation of Existing Agricultural Laws**

Fully fund the mandates of Title 3 and Title 7 and itemize the budget to directly support infrastructure, personnel, research, and development. These funds should be tied to specific benchmarks, timelines, and measurable outcomes that align with a clear strategy for agricultural development.

2. Strengthen Legislative Oversight

The Legislature must go beyond routine committee hearings and hold the executive branch accountable for non-compliance with established law. If necessary, non-performance should be treated as a violation of the VI Code, with penalties imposed through the judicial system.

3. Establish a Performance-Based Accountability Framework

Introduce a system of regular reporting and public transparency around agricultural progress, including budget expenditures, land use, extension services, and production output.

4. Ensure Interagency Collaboration

Agriculture does not exist in a silo. Cross-agency collaboration with planning, environmental protection, economic development, and education sectors is essential to creating a thriving local food economy.

5. Empower Local Stakeholders

Farmers, cooperatives, youth organizations, and community-based groups must be involved in decision-making processes to ensure that policies reflect on-the-ground realities and support innovative Agri-development solutions.

The laws to develop agriculture in the Virgin Islands already exist—but they must be executed with urgency, intention, and accountability. Until the government honors these legislative commitments and empowers its agencies to act, it will remain unrealistic to expect the farming sector, agribusiness, or any agricultural enterprise to thrive.

The availability and accessibility of land, water, and financial resources for agricultural operations, and any barriers you have encountered.

Availability and Accessibility of Land, Water, and Financial Resources for Agriculture in the Virgin Islands

In the Virgin Islands, the availability of land for agriculture is not simply a matter of access, it is a matter of management. Public agricultural lands, including those under VICORP, are intended by law (Act 6836) to be used exclusively for agricultural development. However, this mandate has been undermined over time through legislative amendments that have permitted the use of these lands for non-agricultural purposes.

Furthermore, the Virgin Islands Department of Agriculture lacks both the human capital and financial resources necessary to fulfill its stewardship responsibilities. This neglect has led to a failure to enforce land conservation, implement sustainable practices, and promote the long-term development of the agricultural lands entrusted to the department. As a result, the very foundation for food production and food security continues to erode.

Water availability is a critical challenge. While wells, ponds, and harvesting rainwater can help meet irrigation needs, climate change has compounded the issue. The Virgin Islands, like many small island territories, are experiencing longer periods of drought and increasingly intense rainfall events. Despite this, there has been no comprehensive effort to build infrastructure to

capture and store rainfall when it comes. The absence of water catchment systems results in precious rainwater running off, flowing back into the sea while carrying sediment that can damage marine food systems and coral reefs.

The accessibility of financial resources is another major barrier for farmers. Securing loans from banks and lending institutions is often nearly impossible for agricultural enterprises. This systemic problem is rooted in the lack of widespread local food consumption. Farmers may grow large quantities of diverse produce, but these products frequently fail to reach or be accepted by the broader market. Contrary to the common belief that "all farmers grow the same crops at the same time," the real issue lies in limited consumer demand and market integration.

When local produce goes unsold, it goes to waste—preventing farmers from generating the income they need to stabilize their operations or qualify for credit. Financial viability hinges on consistent local consumption. If farmers could depend on their produce being purchased and consumed locally, they could reinvest earnings into their operations and confidently approach financial institutions for loans and support.

Consider this: What did you eat for breakfast, lunch, and dinner today? How much of it was locally grown? If your answer includes little or no local produce—or you haven't spent even \$2.50 on local food per week—you are not contributing meaningfully to the growth of agriculture in the Virgin Islands. The lack of consumer participation directly undermines the economic development of our local food system.

The pros and cons of operating within the Virgin Islands' agricultural sector, including market access, supply chain issues, and production costs.

The Pros and Cons of Operating Within the Virgin Islands' Agricultural Sector

Pros

In truth, there are few substantial advantages when it comes to operating in the Virgin Islands' agricultural sector. While there is often talk of a "light at the end of the tunnel," that light has remained elusive. However, one of the most promising developments has been the emergence of a strong, collaborative bond among local businesses, community organizations, and national partners committed to supporting agriculture in the territory.

These partnerships represent a foundation for future progress. Through these collective efforts, we—the farmers—are working to create our own light at the **beginning** of the tunnel, rather than waiting for one at the end.

Cons

The challenges, on the other hand, are numerous, entrenched, and deeply disheartening. The agricultural landscape of the Virgin Islands is marked by systemic neglect and institutional failure across all levels of government:

- The **Department of Agriculture**, established to develop the agricultural industry, is currently incapable of fulfilling its mandate or adequately supporting farmers.

- The **University of the Virgin Islands**, a land-grant institution, has turned a blind eye to its obligation to conduct applied research and provide meaningful outreach to the farming community.
- The **Executive Branch** demonstrates little concern for the present or future of local agriculture, despite its recent focus on food and economic development. But the question remains: **whose food and whose economy** are they referring to, if not our own?
- The **Legislature**, though it holding annual committee hearings and introduces legislation, continues to pass laws without allocating adequate funding or enforcing proper oversight, leaving implementation to flounder.

These systemic failures result in broken supply chains, limited market access, and high production costs that farmers must absorb without institutional support. Despite these obstacles, we press forward—not because the system works, but because we are determined to make it work for ourselves and for the next generation.

Your experience with farm-to-table programs, sustainability initiatives, and collaborations with government or private stakeholders.

Experience with Farm-to-Table Programs, Sustainability Initiatives, and Stakeholder Collaborations

Sejah Farm’s experience with farm-to-table initiatives has been met with consistent and positive feedback from the community. Signature programs such as **Bush Cook Chef Cook** and **Bridging the Gap – Summer Enrichment Camp** have created meaningful platforms for educating the public, especially youth, about the importance of local food systems, cultural food traditions, and sustainability.

These programs have not only raised awareness but have also fostered a sense of pride and empowerment within the community by promoting the value of locally grown food and connecting consumers directly to farmers.

Sejah Farm has also experienced productive collaboration with government stakeholders. The **Virgin Islands Department of Agriculture**, under the leadership of its commissioner, has provided ongoing support for Sejah Farm’s efforts to promote food sovereignty and security. In addition, the **Virgin Islands Lottery** and the VI Department of Tourism and other supportive agencies have sponsored and endorsed events like Bush Cook Chef Cook—viewing these not merely as cultural showcases, but as essential educational tools that uplift and promote the agricultural sector.

These collaborations demonstrate that when government entities and community organizations align with a shared vision, progress becomes possible. Leaders in these departments recognize that agriculture must be promoted not as a seasonal event but as a sustained, necessary effort to educate, nourish, and empower the Virgin Islands.

While the committee provided responses to the questions presented, it is essential that we move beyond surface-level answers and begin addressing the deeper, persistent issues that continue to challenge farmers and affect the wider community.

One of the most pressing and long-standing concerns is the inconsistent operation of the abattoir. The facility has been in and out of service for decades, causing financial strain for livestock farmers across the territory. While many farmers have quietly adapted to this disruption, the consequences are far-reaching and deserve serious attention.

When the abattoir is closed, livestock producers face immediate and prolonged loss of income. Breeding programs, carefully planned around the expected availability of harvest and market timelines, must be suspended. Animals intended for market must continue to be fed and maintained, placing a financial burden on farmers and increasing operational costs. This delay in processing livestock disrupts the local food supply chain and drives consumers toward imported meats to meet demand—undermining efforts to build a resilient, locally driven food system.

Moreover, the extended presence of animals on pasture due to delayed processing contributes to environmental degradation. Whether through rotational grazing or open grazing systems, the overuse of pastureland depletes forage, contributes to soil erosion, and increases parasite exposure. As a result, farmers not only experience economic losses from animal mortality but also see a decline in the overall health and productivity of their herds.

Currently, the abattoir is limited to custom slaughter, which functions similarly to bush killing. This means that while the facility is being used, it is not certified under the USDA Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS) for commercial sale. As a result, meat processed through the facility cannot be legally sold to the general public. This restriction severely limits market access for farmers, creating a bottleneck that discourages the honest and transparent sale of local meat. It also undermines consumer trust and public health protections that come with USDA oversight.

Despite these challenges, no formal relief or support mechanisms have been implemented to assist farmers during abattoir closures. The lack of government response to such a fundamental agricultural infrastructure issue is both disheartening and unsustainable.

Page 11 of the 2024 Recovery Plan explicitly states that \$10,000,000 has been allocated for “Aid to Households & Communities – Agriculture.” Yet, for the past seven and a half years, farmers have continued to hear about this funding without ever seeing it activated in any meaningful way to support the territory’s agriculture or provide direct benefits to the farming community.

Agribusiness must be viewed as a core economic development strategy for the U.S. Virgin Islands. It has the potential to not only strengthen food security by increasing local food production and reducing reliance on imports, but also to create jobs, support the local economy, and diversify the territory’s economic base. This investment keeps capital circulating within the Virgin Islands and promotes long-term economic resilience.

There are several critical areas of focus for agribusiness growth in the territory. These include the advancement of sustainable agriculture practices that ensure long-term land viability and

ecological balance. Value-added product development—such as transforming local crops into shelf-stable goods like sauces, jams, or herbal seasonings—presents a high potential for increasing farmer income and export opportunities. Livestock production, particularly through successful livestock operation and initiatives, offers both nutritional and economic benefits. Innovations such as hydroponics and vertical farming can also enhance production capacity while conserving water and reducing land pressure.

By making strategic investments in agribusiness, the U.S. Virgin Islands can establish a more sustainable and self-reliant food system, enhance local economic development, and reduce its overdependence on imported goods and tourism. However, for this vision to become a reality, governmental action must move beyond planning documents and committee hearings. It requires the immediate and transparent implementation of available funding, the restoration of critical infrastructure like the abattoir, and a genuine commitment to supporting the farmers who work every day to feed this territory.

Position Statement: Allocation and Use of Agricultural Funds in the U.S. Virgin Islands 2024 Recovery Plan

The 2024 Recovery Plan for the United States Virgin Islands (American Rescue Plan Act – ARPA is the same) and managed by the VI Office of Management and Budget, outlines the use of funds received through the State and Local Fiscal Recovery Funds (SLFRF) program. With a total allocation of \$547,176,884, these funds are intended to address critical areas impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, including public health, infrastructure, and economic recovery. A significant portion of this funding has been earmarked for community and household assistance, with a specific allocation toward agriculture.

Under the category "Aid to Households & Communities – Agriculture," the Recovery Plan designates \$10,000,000 to support the Virgin Islands' farming sector. This funding represents a crucial investment in the local agricultural industry, which has long struggled with systemic barriers, underfunding, and a lack of institutional support. The stated purpose of this allocation is to provide direct assistance to farmers, bolster agricultural activities, and promote the growth and sustainability of the local farming community.

However, despite this dedicated funding, the Recovery Plan fails to provide clear or specific details regarding how these funds will be distributed, managed, or measured for impact. This lack of transparency raises concerns within the agricultural community, particularly given the long history of delayed implementation and unfulfilled promises regarding agricultural development in the territory.

It is essential to emphasize that the Virgin Islands' agricultural sector is in critical need of both strategic investment and structural support. Without a clearly outlined plan of execution, including benchmarks, reporting mechanisms, and equitable access for farmers, this \$10 million allocation risks falling short of its intended impact (and to date ARPA funds are depleted or unavailable). Farmers and stakeholders are left with unanswered questions about who will benefit, how funds will be accessed, and how effectiveness will be monitored.

Of further concern, Island Food Security Inc. applied on behalf of 20 member farms in July 2024 for access to this designated agricultural funding and was informed that the funds were unavailable. This contradiction between publicly stated allocations and actual fund accessibility underscores the urgent need for clarity and accountability in fund management and distribution.

To ensure that this allocation leads to real progress, there must be:

- Immediate publication of a detailed breakdown of how the \$10 million will be used.
- Transparent processes for farmer participation and application.
- Oversight mechanisms to guarantee accountability and equitable distribution.
- Collaboration with local agricultural organizations to align funding priorities with real-world needs.

In conclusion, while the \$10 million agricultural allocation within the 2024 Recovery Plan signals recognition of the importance of local food systems, its potential will only be realized through intentional action, clear communication, and direct engagement with the farming community. The territory cannot afford for these funds to become another missed opportunity. It is time to ensure that this investment produces measurable, meaningful, and lasting results for the Virgin Islands' agricultural future.

Island Food Security in collaboration with its members to include Sejah Farm of the Virgin Islands and other grass roots supportive agricultural advocate organizations has taken a proactive role in ensuring its members are exposed to the technology and education of a growing agricultural industry.

Recently there was a delegation of farmers representing the U.S. Virgin Islands proudly participated in the Black Belt Meat Summit hosted at Tuskegee University in Tuskegee, Alabama, gathering alongside peers from across the region to explore sustainable meat supply chain solutions. Their attendance marks a pivotal step in connecting the Virgin Islands to regional innovations in mobile meat processing. The Black Belt Meat Summit, organized by the National Meat Summits Steering Committee, is designed to build connections, increase knowledge, and strengthen local and regional meat supply chains across the United States. The conference focuses on bridging gaps in skills, relationships, and resources while responding to a growing consumer demand for locally sourced, high-quality meat products. Island Food Security Inc. members attended the summit on sponsored scholarships generously provided by Tuskegee University, supporting our participation in this important educational and networking opportunity. For decades, the Virgin Islands has operated without a fully functional abattoir. This summit provided vital exposure and hands-on experience with mobile meat processing technology, positioning Island Food Security members to pursue the acquisition of a mobile abattoir. Such a facility would serve livestock and poultry farmers throughout the territory, fostering the development of a robust market for locally raised, grass-fed meats. The summit's emphasis on skills development, market access, and collaboration across the meat sector directly aligns with the mission of Island Food Security Inc., which aims to bolster food sovereignty and resilience in the Virgin Islands. As dedicated farmers we bring back not just insights—but the vision to transform local meat processing infrastructure for generations to come.

Island Food Security Inc. is pleased to share that we have received an invitation to participate in a specialized workshop on goat artificial insemination, scheduled for May 22 and 23, 2025, at Tuskegee University. This invitation represents an important opportunity to expand our technical knowledge, enhance herd genetics, and strengthen capacity within the livestock sector of the Virgin Islands.

In response, we are currently working to secure additional sponsorship to support the participation of three committed goat farmers from our network. Our goal is to ensure they have access to this valuable training, which will not only benefit their individual operations but will also allow them to bring back new skills and knowledge to share with the broader farming community. This initiative is aligned with our ongoing efforts to promote innovation, improve livestock productivity, and contribute to the sustainable development of agriculture in the territory.

We view this partnership with Tuskegee University as a vital step toward building technical expertise and increasing collaboration between local and regional agricultural institutions.

Last, but certainly not least, Sejah Farm of the Virgin Islands is preparing to formally engage this Legislature in the near future to advance a transformative initiative aimed at strengthening the territory's local food system. Through the legislative process, we will be seeking support for the development of critical infrastructure that will enable the broader expansion, accessibility, and distribution of locally produced food throughout the Virgin Islands.

At the core of this initiative is the establishment of a Local Food Hub—a centralized, and collaborative platform intended to coordinate and amplify the efforts of farmers, food producers, and Agri-entrepreneurs across the territory. This vision extends far beyond the construction of a facility. It represents a dynamic local food movement focused on increasing agricultural output, developing value-added products, incorporating post-harvest technologies, promoting agricultural education, and inspiring widespread community engagement in the consumption of locally grown food.

Rooted in the overarching goals of disaster resilience, economic stability, environmental sustainability, and food sovereignty, this project is designed to be both impactful and enduring. As we look to the future, we remain committed to working in partnership with the Legislature, community-based organizations, and allied stakeholders to ensure that this initiative becomes a lasting asset for the territory—one that strengthens our ability to withstand future disruptions, empowers our people, and contributes to a more self-reliant, secure, and thriving local food economy in the Virgin Islands.

In closing, I would like to extend my sincere thanks to the Committee on Economic Development and Agriculture, as well as the 36th Legislature of the Virgin Islands, for the time and thoughtful attention given to this testimony. Your willingness to listen directly to those actively engaged in the agricultural sector is not only appreciated, it is essential. I look forward to continued collaboration with each member of this legislative body as we work together to bring about meaningful change and lasting improvements to the agricultural landscape of our

territory. Through shared commitment, deliberate action, and a united vision, we can build a stronger, more resilient, and self-sustaining future for agriculture in the Virgin Islands.