

Testimony to the 36th Legislature's Committee on Economic Development and Agriculture



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Commissioner

April 16, 2025

Government of the United States Virgin Islands

Department of Agriculture

INTRODUCTION

Good day, Honorable Senators – Chairperson, Senator Hubert Frederick, members of the Committee on Economic Development and Agriculture, and other senators present. We are here to present testimony regarding updates about the Virgin Islands Department of Agriculture’s (VIDA) operations. I am Louis E. Petersen, Jr., Commissioner of the Virgin Islands Department of Agriculture. Here with me today are Director of Administration and Management Aaron Bryan, Director of Agricultural Development James Henderson, Marketing Division Director Shantel Douglas, Forest Stewardship Coordinator Mathilde Wilson, Abattoir Division Director Curleen Rogers, Director of Veterinary Service Dr. David Wenger, Property Inspector Jamal Rogers, Property Manager Tafari Tzaddi, and Hemp Division Director Clifford Joseph, Jr. Although not physically present, we would like to acknowledge and express our sincere appreciation to the rest of the hardworking men and women of the Virgin Islands Department of Agriculture as well as all farmers throughout the territory.

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.

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 OVERVIEW

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During FY25 the Department of Agriculture has experienced numerous successes and challenges. Among these successes were the delivery of programs and services in all divisions of our agency – to include the WIC Farmers Market Nutrition Program, the Senior Farmers Market Nutrition Program, progress with USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service project in Bordeaux, successful negotiations with employee unions and the Office of Collective Bargaining, the acquisition of ARPA funds, the issuance of a bid request for the cistern construction project in Bordeaux, Agrifest, upgrades to the St. Croix abattoir, and the purchase of new equipment with funding from the Office of the Interior. Challenges include staff shortages, machinery breakdown, inclement weather preventing land preparation work, funding shortages, cash flow availability, low staff salaries, and lack of insurance providers to offer liability coverage for farm operations. Our testimony today will not only outline these challenges but highlight VIDA's recommended solutions or approach to addressing these issues.

ADMINISTRATIVE DIVISION

The administrative division has continued to serve as the central hub of the Department of Agriculture by managing human and financial resources and procuring items for all other divisions. During the present fiscal period we have been challenged as a result of a serious staff shortage, especially in four critical areas – at present the positions of Assistant Commissioner, Procurement Officer, and Administrator of Fiscal and Personnel Services are vacant. In addition, our Deputy Commissioner, Riise Richards, has been on medical leave for the past two months. I take this opportunity to express my appreciation to all the members of my team that have undertaken additional tasks to keep our agency moving forward while we work to address these important issues of vacancy.

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An additional challenge being faced by our team is the lack of a functional telephone system on St. Croix. Our administrative team is working closely with both VIYA and the Bureau of Information Technology to address this issue which hampers communication with our clients and the community in general.

MARKETING DIVISION

Through its Specialty Crop Block Grant VIDA established an on-going an Agriculture Development Pilot Program for (at risk) Youths living in Public Housing Communities to teach the youth participants how to grow, market, and prepare locally grown crops for consumption.

Twenty youth residents from the Candido Guadalupe and Kirwan Terrace Housing Communities are currently engaged in the program. The participants have received materials and technical assistance to ensure their success. This initiative is being implemented in collaboration with the Virgin Islands Housing Authority and the St. Croix Science Teachers Association.

- The Marketing Division is also preparing to initiate a second round of the Julie Mango in Every Yard Program, with the goal of enrolling 60 participants in a three-day workshop to teach grafting, pruning, and overall tree care and maintenance while promoting the Julie Mango as the Fruit of Choice of the US Virgin Islands.

Specialty Crop Block Grant funding also supports the Building Youth Capacity for Sustainable Food Security Through S.T.E.A.M Integration initiative. This is an on-going project to increase the level of knowledge among youth regarding specialty crops, their

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production, consumption, and nutritional value through agricultural literacy activities, and interdisciplinary lesson plans.

Some of our Specialty Crop Block Grant funding is sub granted to the UVI School of Agriculture for research projects that focus on developing or promoting practices and strategies to increase farm income and marketable yield on several crops such as sweet potato, java plum, and varieties of cucurbits. At the conclusion of the research projects, improved or increased plant materials will be distributed to farmers at no cost.

Commencing in the month of April (2025) our agency will implement the next cycle of the WIC Farmers Market Nutritional Program and the Senior Farmers Market Nutrition Program. While the purpose of the WIC Farmers Market Nutritional Program is to provide access to fresh locally grown fruits and vegetables to eligible women infants and children the Senior Farmers Market Nutrition Program offers low-income seniors in the US Virgin Islands access to fresh, locally grown fruits, vegetables, honey, and herbs. Both programs benefit our community by making available fresh, locally produced farm products while encouraging increased farm production. Both initiatives purchase farm products with USDA grant funding for distribution to eligible clients.

VETERINARY SERVICE DIVISION

During the current fiscal year, the Division of Veterinary Services:

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- Onboarded a new Director of Veterinary Services (August 2024)
- Participated in onboarding training from deployed USDA personnel; the objective of this activity was to orient the new divisional director and veterinary staff regarding issues associated with (expired) cooperative agreements
- Initiated the process of re-establishing 3 federally funded cooperative agreements with USDA; one of these agreements, the Tropical Bont Tick Eradication Program, has been fully executed.
- Inventoried the division's critical veterinary supplies and began the process of restocking as necessary (This task could not be completed until a new director was hired.)
- Continued to provide routine veterinary care service for farmers and monitor farms as a part of the Tropical Bont Tick Eradication Program. Surveillance for Avian Influenza commenced in October of last year.
- Provided continuous regulatory functions for USVI territory even during the interim period without a director
- Unfortunately, euthanized a shipment of goats that were imported into the territory following a port inspection, and ultimately the diagnosis of a disease that is foreign to the USVI. Such vigilance to protect the local agricultural sector from foreign diseases is highly commendable.
- Perhaps the greatest challenge facing this division is the increased movement of live animals into the territory without VIDA's awareness – sometimes without health

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certificates or inspections. Our staff are actively working with our federal partners to address this challenge and close this gap. Our recent membership in the Caribbean Risk Assessment Group (CRAG) should prove invaluable in this effort.

FOOD PRODUCTION DIVISION

The farming community relies heavily on the Division of Food Production for numerous services, including hay baling, land preparation (grass cutting, clearing, harrowing, tilling, banking) and water delivery. To improve the delivery of these support services additional staff are needed, including heavy equipment operators, heavy equipment mechanics, and laborers. Nevertheless, during the current fiscal year we were able to accomplish the following:

- Baling of 526 rolls of hay for farmers; some of these bales were shipped from St. Croix to St. Thomas
- The staff conducted routine maintenance and necessary repairs to farmland infrastructure, including water distribution line repairs and replacements, water pump repairs and replacement, and addressing electrical failures in both districts.
- In addition, on St. Croix 70, 500 gallons of water were purchased and transported to farm sites through our water delivery service. Farmers (mostly livestock producers) also collected and transported 80,400 gallons of water – free of charge -- from the department's standpipe.
- In the St. Thomas/St. John district a new piece of heavy equipment, a backhoe, recently came online and is being used for the benefit of the farming community.

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This purchase was made possible through a grant award from the U.S. Department of the Interior. Additionally, we are working with federal and private sector partners to address road maintenance issues in the Bordeaux farmland area. This is an ongoing initiative.

- Our heavy equipment mechanics are actively working on the repair of several equipment, including two bulldozers, a tractor, and two traxcavators, and front-end loader. These repairs will be completed once the appropriate replacement parts are received. In order to reduce the 'down time' of our equipment, funding is needed to employ additional mechanics. VIDA is working toward the hiring of two mechanics in the St. Croix district and contracting a heavy equipment/automobile repairman - on an as needed basis - in the St. Thomas/St. John district during the current fiscal year.

Finally, to address the issue of machinery break down, we have also begun the process of engaging private sector partners to provide additional training for our operators and mechanics regarding the upkeep, maintenance, and operation of equipment.

NURSERY

On St. Croix and St. John our plant nurseries continue to support our farming [and gardening] clientele by providing a variety of vegetable seedlings. To improve the delivery of this service we encourage producers to place orders to ensure that their needs are met

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in a timely manner. On St. Thomas our nursery is under repair with the support of FEMA funds to address 2017 hurricane related damages. We look forward to the completion of the repairs and the reopening of our facility by June of this year. We continue to be challenged by our territory-wide cashed strapped situation which hampers the timely procurement of supplies such as soil, fertilizer, and livestock feed.

ABATTOIR DIVISION

On St. Croix our abattoir is presently functional and providing slaughtering services to our clients. The facility continues to be in transition as we systematically transform the slaughterhouse by replacing old, outdated components with modern, up-to-date equipment. During the past year several pieces of machinery have been replaced or significantly repaired. These renovations included the complete repair of the rumping station by replacing the hydraulic elevating platform, the replacement of the transfer valves, and the repair of the transfer hoist. In addition, a new steam boiler was installed, the steam boiler distribution lines and insulation were replaced, and all the air curtains on the kill floor were replaced. With the support of ARPA funds and with the support of the Office of the Governor and the Office of Management and Budget we are currently procuring and replacing other equipment, including a larger compressor, a live weight scale, an air exhaust fresh air intake ventilation system for the protection of employees, an offal processor for tripe processing, a band saw, and a scalding/dehairing machine to facilitate the slaughter of larger sized hogs. Once these items are acquired and installed, this would practically complete our initiative to renew the St. Croix abattoir with all updated equipment and operating systems.

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Regarding staffing at the abattoir, we are in the process of hiring a maintenance engineer who will be responsible for the routine maintenance and upkeep of the abattoir, thereby preventing or reducing future extended closures due to mechanical failures. We have completed the interview phase, and a suitable candidate has been identified. Our plans also include the hiring of an additional butcher during the current year. Hiring an additional butcher will allow us to continue slaughtering services without being extremely short staffed as two employees have recently retired. I am appreciative of the current staff for their willingness to assume additional tasks and receive in-house training as we work to hire and onboard new employees.

In the St. Thomas/St. John District we are desperately in need of an operational abattoir. At present livestock are transported from St. Thomas to St. Croix for slaughtering at our expense. However, for the past several months we have been unable to service farmers in the St. Thomas/St. John District due to a change in the cargo shipping schedule. Presently, there is no active marine cargo vessel traveling on a direct route from St. Thomas to St. Croix. These arrangements are both unreliable and unsustainable. Thus, our plans to address this need have drastically changed. Previously, we made plans to demolish our current facilities on St. Thomas and purchase a mobile unit to provide continuity of service for livestock farmers in the St. Thomas/St. John District. However, the funding for this plan has not materialized. Our revised plans involve the renovation of the existing facility. We are actively working with the Department of Public Works to develop a scope of work and

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cost for the renovation project. In addition to the renovations, necessary equipment will have to be purchased, and the appropriate staff hired.

FORESTRY DIVISION

Forest Stewardship Program

The purpose of the Forest Stewardship Program (FSP) is to assist eligible participants to manage their forest and related resources more actively through the development and execution of management plans tailored to improve native forests and environmental quality.

Working with the US forest Service/IITF VIDA's Forestry Coordinator organized and conducted a training session for seven (7) St Croix Management Plan Preparers (MPP) who will soon be contracted to work with FSP clients to renew expired Management Plans and prepare new ones. A STT/STJ training session is now being planned for the upcoming weeks.

To support implementation of the FSP VIDA applied for and received a grant award in the amount of \$225,000 to produce and distribute native tree seedlings to clients on St Croix, St Thomas, and St John. These funds were also used to hire two nursery assistants who have already begun working to reestablish the St Croix tree nursery, propagating trees and collecting seeds for reforestation.

VIDA also successfully applied for and received a \$500,000 grant for direct support to small-forest landowners in the reforestation of their lands. This grant award will also be used to

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directly impact farmers by securing and distributing thousands of fruit trees for VIDA's Fruit Orchard Establishment Project throughout the Territory.

Regarding the Forest Legacy purchase of 91 acres on Inner Brass Cay, we are continuing the due diligence process for this important initiative. Following a request for bids, a price quotation has been accepted for a contractor to conduct the required survey. We are preparing the contractual documents so that surveying can commence.

URBAN and COMMUNITY FORESTRY

Some of the key Accomplishments in 2024 include:

1. Enhanced Communication & Compliance: Successfully established robust communication lines with other governmental entities and the community in general, significantly increasing awareness and enhancing our ability to ensure compliance with the Virgin Islands Tree Law.
2. Extensive Tree Propagation & Distribution: Successfully collected, propagated, and distributed over 2,000 trees throughout the Virgin Islands.
3. Increased, Widespread Educational and Community Outreach: Provided invaluable educational outreach programs on St. Thomas, St. John, and St. Croix, empowering communities with knowledge about urban forestry, resulting in increased volunteer participation in U&CF activities.

U&CF Challenges Encountered in 2024:

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1. There is a need for improvement regarding council members' participation in meetings to deliberate proposals and approve projects for subgrant funding.

2. Coastal Erosion & Species Scarcity: Program implementation was hampered by an insufficient supply of vital coastal protection species like Manchineel, Seagrape, Mangrove, and Wild Maran to address coastal areas that face erosion.

Future Program Improvement:

To address the challenges outlined and ensure the U&CF program's long-term success, our team is actively pursuing the following initiatives:

1. Revenue Generation Strategies: Exploring viable avenues to generate revenue for the Department of Agriculture, including:

- Propagating trees for sale to the public.
- Providing small-scale water delivery to small farmers and backyard growers at a cost-recovery price (up to 500 gallons).
- Offering technical assistance at cost to community members to facilitate residential and commercial tree management.

2. Plant Material Sourcing: Increase the sourcing, propagation, and collection of plant materials for tree plantings on each island through programmatic outreach activities.

STATUS UPDATE ON LEASE AGREEMENTS FOR FARMERS

The VIDA has a total of forty (40) expired lease agreements for farmers on St. Thomas and ten (10) for farmers on St. Croix. Of this total number of expired lease agreements, 8 are being

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processed for renewal on St. Croix. During the past year and a half, our agency faced great difficulty with executing lease agreements for farmers due to a lack of insurance providers who would offer liability insurance coverage for farmers. However, due to the hard work of the VIDA team with major support from the Office of the Lieutenant Governor, an insurance company has recently agreed to extend its services to our farming clientele. We will be hosting meetings with farmers in both districts to share details of this development and other department updates. Currently on St. Croix we have two (2) Insurance companies that offer Farmers liability Insurance on a case-by-case basis, Inter Ocean and Marshall and Sterling; however, no livestock is accepted through the provider for Marshall and Sterling. In the St. Thomas/St. John District Theodore Tunic offers the same coverage.

The Department of Agriculture has completed its internal process to categorize all lease arrangements after conducting site visits and evaluating them on a case-by-case basis. Based on this system, in the St. Thomas/St. John District 18 leases are recommended for renewal, 10 for non-renewal, and 12 for probationary renewal. In the St. Croix District, we have a total of 149 active leases and land use permits. Of this total 83 of the expired leases are recommended for renewal, 30 for non-renewal, and 24 for probationary renewal.

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 have requested and received cost estimates for addressing some of our land survey needs in both districts. During the current fiscal year, funds will be budgeted to survey some of these acreages.

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LICENSED FARMERS

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. However, upon careful review of the list of licensed farmers, some of the license holders are actually 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 is working to educate all home gardeners regarding our requirements for the renewal of their licenses.

SOLUTIONS TO AGRICULTURAL CHALLENGES

Based on our assessment of the challenges facing the agricultural sector, our team is strongly convinced that one of the most important tools that should be employed in addressing our concerns is the Cooperative Business Model. This business strategy has the potential to successfully resolve the issues confronting farmers and our agency. As an example of this assertion, we encourage farmers to pool their collective resources, including their economic power to make bulk purchases of their agricultural inputs such as livestock feed, fertilizer, irrigation supplies, pesticides, soil, and other supplies. This collective approach reduces individual costs while resulting in a timelier acquisition of their needs. Another recommendation is for producers to collectively acquire machinery (such as a tractor and implements) to conduct their land preparation services. This solution-oriented approach is guaranteed to be a literal 'game changer' in the growth and development of the agricultural

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sector. In support of this collective effort by farmers, the Department of Agriculture is preparing to purchase one 40-ft. trailer per island for the purpose of storing bulk supplies purchased by farmers. The Department of Agriculture will also provide the land space for the placement of the storage containers. One group of farmers on St. Thomas has already assumed this challenge; the members of the group collectively purchase their livestock feed supplies. Consequently, each member realizes cost savings while obtaining higher quality grain in a timely manner.

In addition, to support groups of farmers our heavy equipment mechanics will be working to repair one of our offline tractors, while our heavy equipment operators will train a targeted group (Community Garden clients) of farmers regarding the care, maintenance, and use of the repaired equipment. Once the repairs and training phases are completed, the tractor will be assigned to the group to address their land preparation needs while fostering a culture of increased self-reliance. Similarly, in the St. Thomas/St. John District small type equipment (i.e. rototillers) will be purchased and granted to groups of producers for joint usage and benefit.

LOOKING AHEAD

Pursuant to our goal of supporting the development and strengthening of farmers' organizations, including cooperatives, VIDA in conjunction with the Federation of Southern Cooperatives and the UVI School of Agriculture will continue to spearhead training efforts to educate members of the farming community about the Cooperative Business Model. Again, we are confident that this collective approach has the key/potential for addressing and resolving the issues facing our farmers.

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The Department of Agriculture also looks forward to the continuation and execution of our farmland infrastructure projects. This includes the resumption of our joint project with USDA/NRCS in Estate Bordeaux on St. Thomas for the improvement of access roads as well as water storage and distribution systems. However, the movement and progress of this \$12M initiative is extremely dependent upon federal policy decisions. We also are excited about the cistern construction project to construct two 100,000 – gallon water storage facilities to support increased farm production in Estate Bordeaux. We are grateful to the Office of the Governor and the Office of Management and Budget for supporting this meaningful initiative with the use of ARPA funds. We are also thankful for the support of the teams at the Department of Public Works and the Department of Property and Procurement for their support of this project.

Farmers on St. Thomas will soon benefit from our renewed water delivery service when our new 2,500-gallon water truck arrives in a few weeks.

On St. John we look forward to initiating our plans for site preparation for the Coral Bay Community Gardens while on St. Croix we will be increasing water resources by connecting new water wells and extending water distribution lines for producers in the Community Gardens.

Finally, through our agency's work in partnership with and as a part of the Local Farm and Food Council, we were proud to award more than \$500,000 to farmers and fishermen to improve their operations and increase food production. I am hopeful that we, with the support of the support of the 36th Legislature, the Office of the Governor, and the Office of

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Management and Budget, will be funded again during the current fiscal year to continue impacting and incentivizing the agricultural sector.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I express our heartfelt appreciation to you, Committee Chairman Senator Hubert Frederick, on behalf of the VIDA Team, for your support and demonstrated commitment to our agency and the farming community. 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 the Department of Agriculture and our primary clients – the Virgin Islands farmers. We acknowledge and thank the honorable Governor and Lieutenant Governor for their leadership and unwavering support of the Virgin Islands Department of Agriculture. We also 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.

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