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Department of Agriculture



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**TESTIMONY OF THE VIRGIN ISLANDS DEPARTMENT OF
AGRICULTURE**

Before the Committee on Economic Development and Agriculture.

Regarding Bill No. 36-0087

**An Act Amending Title 7, Virgin Islands Code, by Adding Chapter 16
Requiring the Virgin Islands Department of Agriculture to Establish and
Manage a 30-Acre Orchard on Government-Owned Land on St. Croix.**

August 10, 2026

Good day, Mr. Chairman, and distinguished members of the Committee.

My name is Louis E. Petersen, Jr., Commissioner of the Virgin Islands Department of Agriculture (VIDA). Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony in reference to Bill No. 36-0087, which seeks to amend Title 7 of the Virgin Islands Code by adding Chapter 16 to require the Department of Agriculture to establish and manage a 30-acre orchard on government-owned land on St. Croix.

The Department supports the intent, spirit and goals of this legislation which will lead to increased food production and security while supporting economic development in the Territory. The establishment of an orchard aligns with the Department's mission to promote agricultural development, reduce fruit import levels, enhance food security, diversify local agricultural production, and create opportunities for farmers, and the broader community through partnerships and workforce development opportunities with the Department of Education (i.e. schools) and the UVI School of Agriculture. Furthermore, this initiative is supported by the Territorial Agricultural Plan and represents a potential territorial asset.

While the Department supports the concept and goals of the bill, we respectfully note that the successful implementation and long-term sustainability of such a 30-acre fruit orchard will require significant dedicated resources to ensure its success. These resources include staff, planting materials, soil amendments, pest control supplies, irrigation materials, equipment for land preparation, fencing for security as well as water and energy supply systems. Following establishment, all plots that comprise the 30 acres of fruit orchards would require ongoing, routine maintenance. At present VIDA is not adequately resourced to assume this task. As a matter of fact, per VIC, VIDA is required to execute many other mandates for which it is poorly equipped to accomplish. Without proper funding to ensure the necessary resources, VIDA would not be able to successfully implement the provisions of Bill No. 36-0087.

Therefore, the Department respectfully recommends that the bill sponsor identifies and secures an adequate funding source to support the establishment, operation, and maintenance of the orchard. Without dedicated funding, the Department will undoubtedly face challenges in fully implementing the requirements of the legislation while maintaining its ongoing programs and responsibilities.

In reference to funding this initiative with annual legislative appropriations and our agency's operating budget, some of VIDA's federal funds may be able to support the orchard program. However, such resources may be limited and should not be relied upon for long-term sustainability. Another source of funding could be realized through the practice of alley cropping which involves the planting of cash crops between rows of fruit trees during the early stages of orchard establishment to generate income until the fruit trees are well established, mature and productive. While these are only a few of several options for obtaining capital, it should be noted that the funding strategies must be finalized prior to project implementation.

In addition to funding issues, VIDA is also concerned about its potential for future competition with local farmers based on the present version of Bill No. 36-0087. Due to our current level of dependency on imported fruits, such competition would not be realized during the initial and early years of orchard establishment. However, as we envision the success of this initiative – over the long term – and import levels are positively impacted, competition with farmers is possible.

In contrast to the developmental model proposed in Bill No. 36-0887, VIDA offers an alternate approach for consideration. This proposed model for orchard development would reflect a partnership between farmers and the Department of Agriculture. Based on this arrangement VIDA would have increased staff capacity



that would be responsible for the procurement and propagation of the fruit tree saplings which would be sold to farmers. Funds generated from such sales would be reinvested into a revolving account to sustain the orchard development project. Farmer selection and participation in the program would follow a vetting process to ensure basic provisions such as a reliable water supply. Utilizing this approach, VIDA would establish a limited number of small scale (1 acre) plots that would serve as sources of germplasm collections (i.e. variety collection banks) from which grafting materials could be sourced and used by farmers and the VIDA nursery staff to support program sustainability. However, the primary orchards would be established and maintained by producers for commercial production.

Consistent with this model, the members of We Grow Food, Inc. (farmers organization based in the Bordeaux area of St. Thomas) and the Department of Agriculture are engaged in ongoing conversations about partnering to establish fruit orchards on the farmland area of Estate Bordeaux. In this proposed arrangement, VIDA may establish small manageable orchard plots, but farmers would assume responsibility for the main orchards. I am recommending that Bill No. 36-0087 be modified to include provisions for a smaller scale orchard initiative in the St. Thomas/St. John District.

I am also recommending that a strategic, data-driven approach be used in the planning of our fruit orchards. The list of tree types proposed in Bill No. 36-0087 should be narrowed down and prioritized. The crops selected should be based on crops of high consumer demand and therefore of high import status. The goal should be to strategically and incrementally reduce the importation of selected crops consumed by Virgin Islanders. Furthermore, such data collected from the Bureau of Economic Research should be used as a guide to determine the acreage of each crop to be established to incrementally target production goals.

In summary, the Virgin Islands Department of Agriculture supports the intent of Bill No. 36-0087 and the author and proponents of this proposed legislation. We trust that the recommendations and comments shared today by VIDA and fellow testifiers will serve as constructive feedback to enhance the Bill, resulting in fruitful results for the benefit of present and future generations of Virgin Islanders.

This ends my prepared testimony; I look forward to responding to questions and engaging in meaningful dialogue regarding this important measure.

