



U.S. VIRGIN ISLANDS LOCAL FOOD AND FARM COUNCIL
Advancing Agricultural Sustainability and Food Security in the USVI

TESTIMONY OF

V.I. LOCAL FOOD AND FARM COUNCIL

PRESENTED BY

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DESIGNATED COUNCIL REPRESENTATIVE

ON BEHALF OF THE CO-CHAIRS

AUGUST 10, 2026

DR. SAFIYA GEORGE, CO-CHAIR

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**BEFORE THE
COMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT
AND AGRICULTURE**

**THIRTY-SIXTH LEGISLATURE OF THE
VIRGIN ISLANDS**

**FRITS LAWAEZ
LEGISLATIVE CONFERENCE ROOM
ST. CROIX, U.S. VIRGIN ISLANDS**

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Good morning, Honorable Senator Hubert L. Frederick, Chair of the Committee on Economic Development and Agriculture; members of the Committee; legislative staff; fellow testifiers; and members of the public.

My name is Sommer Sibilly-Brown. I am the Chief Executive Officer of the Virgin Islands Good Food Coalition; however, I am not appearing today in that capacity. I appear as the designated representative of the Virgin Islands Local Food and Farm Council and am presenting the Council's official position on Bill No. 36-0087, the Territorial Orchard Initiative.

Thank you for inviting the Council to provide testimony on this important matter. The Council recognizes the intent of Bill No. 36-0087 and supports its broader goals of increasing local fruit production, strengthening food security, and advancing the Strategic Orchard Development Initiative contained in the Virgin Islands Agricultural Plan. After reviewing the bill and considering the experience of farmers, agricultural professionals, implementing agencies, and other Council members, the Council has determined that it cannot support the legislation in its current form.

Although the bill seeks to advance orchard development, it expands the Agricultural Plan's 10-acre recommendation to 30 acres and assigns the Department of Agriculture responsibility for operating the orchard without fully addressing the funding, staffing, land-use, production, and market systems necessary for long-term success. The Council offers its concerns and recommendations in a constructive spirit and believes the proposed initiative can be strengthened through a phased, properly funded, and farmer-centered approach.

Importance of the Council's Testimony

The Local Food and Farm Council was established under Act No. 8716 to support implementation of the Virgin Islands Agricultural Plan and make recommendations concerning agricultural law and policy. This testimony directly advances Mandate No. 1, which calls for the Council to review existing and proposed agricultural laws and recommend changes needed to strengthen the Territory's agricultural system. Its membership brings together farmers, fishers, government agencies, educational institutions, technical professionals, and community stakeholders. The Council's participation is particularly important because Bill No. 36-0087 relies on the Agricultural Plan and would materially expand one of its recommendations.

Orchard development is included in the Agricultural Plan under Additional Recommendation No. IV, the Strategic Orchard Development Initiative. The Plan recommends designating 10 acres of government farmland and identifies necessary investments in land preparation, fencing, planting material, irrigation, well development, pest management, and maintenance. It does not establish the 30-acre, government-operated model proposed by the bill or define its ownership, management, market, and revenue structure.

Some Council members will also testify in their separate professional or institutional capacities. Those presentations will reflect the positions of their respective agencies or organizations. My testimony today presents the collective position formally adopted by the Local Food and Farm Council.

Implementation and Resource Considerations

The bill assigns the Department of Agriculture responsibility for establishing and managing a 30-acre orchard. The Council is concerned that the legislation does not yet provide a complete and reliable framework for financing the orchard's establishment, operation, and long-term maintenance.

At a minimum, successful implementation would require:

- Surveyed and prepared land; fencing; irrigation and water-storage systems; equipment; and suitable planting material;
- Dedicated personnel, technical expertise, pest- and disease-management resources, security, and ongoing maintenance; and

- Dedicated, recurring funding for ongoing operations and maintenance, together with the capacity to harvest, store, process, distribute, and market the resulting produce.

These requirements are substantial, and the bill does not identify the dedicated personnel or funding necessary to meet them. In addition, some fruit trees may require five to seven years or longer to reach commercially meaningful production. Potential revenue from future harvests therefore cannot be expected to finance the orchard's establishment and early operations.

Alignment with the Virgin Islands Agricultural Plan

The Agricultural Plan's Strategic Orchard Development Initiative recommends designating 10 acres of government farmland for orchard development. Bill No. 36-0087 expands that recommendation to a 30-acre orchard to be established and managed by the Department of Agriculture.

Although the Agricultural Plan supports orchard development, it does not define the ownership, management, staffing, financing, marketing, or revenue structure for the expanded government-managed model proposed by the bill. The increase in acreage and assignment of continuing operational responsibility to the Department represent material changes that warrant additional fiscal, land-use, management, and market analysis.

A phased approach may provide a more practical way to advance the Plan's recommendation while developing the capacity needed for expansion. Following the required feasibility and market analyses, the Territory could evaluate whether a limited mother orchard for planting material, demonstration, education, and training, combined with a distributed network of qualified farmer-led orchards, would provide a more sustainable model.

Land Availability and Existing Orchard Production

Government-owned agricultural land that appears unused may not necessarily be ready or available for orchard development. Some acreage may require surveying, subdivision, land preparation, water infrastructure, or other work before it can be placed into production. Existing and prospective farmers also continue to seek land to begin or expand their operations. Before reserving 30 acres for a government-managed orchard, the Territory should determine whether doing so would reduce the land available to individual farmers and farming groups.

The planning process should include an inventory of existing public orchard assets, including productive fruit trees and the mango orchard at the Agriculture and Food Fair grounds. It should also document current tropical-fruit production on St. Croix, including existing orchard acreage, crops, seasonal availability, market demand, and opportunities for expansion. UVI Cooperative Extension Service, VIDA, and existing producers may be able to assist with this assessment. Public investment should address documented production gaps and strengthen local producers rather than create avoidable competition or additional supply where local markets are already being met.

A Farmer-Centered Implementation Model

The Council recommends establishing a structured territorial orchard program through which qualified farmers, farming groups, producers, and participating landowners can establish or expand orchards. Under this model, the Department of Agriculture would coordinate and support a distributed network of participating orchards rather than assume primary responsibility for operating a single government-managed production site. Its role could include providing planting material, technical assistance, training, infrastructure support, production standards, and program monitoring.

This model could:

1. Strengthen existing farms and bring additional privately owned or leased land into production;
2. Distribute production across the islands, reducing the risks associated with relying on a single site; and
3. Build local ownership, accountability, and long-term productive capacity.

Participation should be based on a transparent application and vetting process. Applicants should demonstrate legal access to suitable land and water, relevant agricultural experience, a viable production plan, identified markets, and willingness to comply with training, reporting, and performance requirements. Assistance should be tied to defined responsibilities and verified implementation milestones.

The Council also discussed the possibility of offering trees at cost or for a modest amount and placing the proceeds into a revolving fund to support future participants. This mechanism would require further evaluation, but it could promote shared investment, accountability, and continuity while allowing program resources to benefit additional farmers over time.

VIDA has also accessed grant funding to support fruit-tree distribution and orchard establishment. The planning process should therefore determine whether existing authority, grants, technical assistance, and targeted cost-sharing could be used more effectively to help qualified farmers establish or expand orchards without creating a new permanent government-operated production site. Farmers should also receive assistance identifying and applying for available funding.

Accountability measures must recognize the realities of agricultural production. Drought, disease, storms, unsuitable planting material, and other conditions beyond a participant's reasonable control may result in losses despite responsible management. A fair program should distinguish between unavoidable agricultural losses and failure to fulfill the responsibilities established in an approved production plan.

Phased and Data-Driven Development

The bill identifies 27 crops for inclusion. Although crop diversity can contribute to resilience and food security, attempting to establish all 27 crops simultaneously within a single 30-acre orchard may spread available resources too broadly and make it difficult to achieve sufficient production of priority crops.

The Council recommends beginning with a limited number of priority crops selected using import, production, climate-suitability, and market data. The Territory should determine:

1. Which suitable crops have the greatest potential to reduce imports, meet local demand, or serve viable export markets;
2. The acreage, production timeline, staffing, and infrastructure required to achieve meaningful scale;
3. How the resulting harvest will be processed, stored, distributed, marketed, and made accessible to Virgin Islands residents.

Council members discussed several crops as possible examples but did not adopt a final crop list. Crop selection should therefore be based on verified data and technical analysis rather than the number of varieties identified in the legislation. UVI Cooperative Extension Service, VIDA technical personnel, plant-health specialists, and experienced producers should evaluate the proposed crops and varieties based on local growing conditions, market potential, and pest and disease risks. Citrus and other disease-sensitive crops should not be mandated until their suitability and likelihood of successful production have been established.

The planning process should also consider the feasibility of organic and other sustainable production practices for the selected crops, taking into account pest and disease pressures, input availability, labor requirements, environmental benefits, and production costs.

Implementation should begin with a manageable pilot focused on selected crops and measurable outcomes. Expansion should occur in phases based on an evaluation of survival rates, productivity, costs, market demand, and the program's overall performance.

Market Access and the Role of the Department

The legislation should clearly define how the harvest will be used, who its intended beneficiaries are, and how the resulting produce will be allocated, priced, and distributed. Priority should be given to Virgin Islands

residents, local food access, and the Territory's broader food-security objectives. Orchard production should also be connected to the processing, cold-storage, distribution, and market-development systems necessary to move fruit from the orchard into the community.

Increased acreage does not automatically produce a stronger agricultural economy. If additional fruit reaches the market during periods of seasonal abundance without adequate buyers, processing, preservation, storage, or distribution capacity, the result could be greater waste and lower returns for existing farmers. The analysis should therefore determine whether the greater need is additional production, improved market coordination, or investment in processing and storage.

The program should establish safeguards against unintended government competition with local producers. When Virgin Islands farmers are capable of meeting institutional or commercial demand, they should be afforded the first opportunity to serve those markets. Production from a government-supported orchard should complement existing local production, address unmet needs, and advance clearly defined food-security purposes. Consistent with this approach, the Department's principal role should be to support, coordinate, and strengthen the agricultural industry while creating opportunities for local producers to succeed.

Council Recommendations

The Local Food and Farm Council respectfully recommends that the Committee:

1. Hold Bill No. 36-0087 in Committee for further development rather than advance it in its current form.
2. Convene a producer-centered working session involving the Council, existing orchard operators, other farmers, VIDA, UVI Cooperative Extension Service, plant-health specialists, landowners, processors, institutional purchasers, and market representatives to refine the proposal and its implementation structure.
3. Complete the required analyses, including a fiscal analysis, land-use assessment, operational feasibility analysis, and inventory of existing public orchard assets and current tropical-fruit production, including available information on acreage, crops, seasonal supply, market demand, and opportunities for expansion. Provide the findings to the Committee before further legislative action.
4. Develop a fully funded, phased program following completion of the required analyses and consistent with the Agricultural Plan's 10-acre baseline. Evaluate whether a limited mother orchard combined with a distributed network of qualified farmer-led and community-based orchards provides the most effective and sustainable model.
5. Use verified data and technical analysis, including food import, local production, seasonal supply, climate suitability, pest and disease risk, and market demand data to identify priority crops and determine the acreage, production timeline, and infrastructure required to produce them at a meaningful scale. Crop selection should remain a technical decision rather than be prescribed in statute.
6. Provide the resources required, including personnel, infrastructure, technical assistance, processing, storage, distribution, monitoring, and dedicated recurring funding for ongoing operations and maintenance.
7. Define the use and beneficiaries of the harvest, including how it will be allocated, priced, distributed, and used; prioritize local food access; and establish safeguards against unintended government competition with Virgin Islands farmers in institutional and commercial markets.
8. Establish accountability measures, including measurable performance standards, reporting requirements, participant responsibilities, and procedures for evaluating the program before further expansion, with a defined role for the Council in reviewing implementation and consistency with the Agricultural Plan.
9. Require a realistic multiyear financial and operational plan before implementation begins, addressing start-up costs, recurring expenses, staffing, maintenance, infrastructure, sources of funding, anticipated production timelines, projected revenue, and long-term program sustainability.

Closing Remarks

The Council appreciates the Legislature's attention to food security and shares its goal of increasing local fruit production. Our concerns do not reflect opposition to orchard development. Rather, they reflect the need for an approach that is adequately funded, operationally sound, aligned with the Agricultural Plan, and structured to strengthen Virgin Islands farmers.

Bill No. 36-0087 does not yet provide the funding, implementation structure, farmer protections, or market framework necessary to achieve those objectives. The Council believes a phased approach grounded in the Agricultural Plan's 10-acre baseline and designed to strengthen qualified farmer-led orchards should be fully evaluated before the Territory commits to a 30-acre government-operated model.

On behalf of the Local Food and Farm Council, I respectfully ask the Committee to hold the bill for further development. The Council stands ready to work with the Legislature, farmers, implementing agencies, and other agricultural stakeholders on a revised proposal.

Thank you again for the opportunity to appear before you today. I welcome your questions.