

TESTIMONY COMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT & AGRICULTURE

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TESTIMONY ON BILL NO. 36-0087 An Act Requiring the Virgin Islands
Department of Agriculture to Establish and Manage a 30-Acre Orchard on St. Croix

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

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today and provide testimony on Bill No. 36-0087. I appreciate the Committee's continued commitment to advancing discussions surrounding agriculture, food security, and economic development within our Territory. I am honored to share my perspective on this important piece of legislation and its potential impact on the future of agriculture in the Virgin Islands.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on Bill No. 36-0087, which seeks to require the Virgin Islands Department of Agriculture (VIDA) to establish and manage a 30-acre orchard on St. Croix.

At the outset, I would like to commend Senator Marise James for bringing attention to an issue of critical importance to the future of agriculture in the Virgin Islands. The cultivation of perennial fruit crops such as mango, breadfruit, tamarind, guava, soursop, citrus, coconut, and other tropical fruit species identified in the bill represents a significant opportunity to strengthen local food production, preserve agricultural heritage, expand agritourism opportunities, and improve food security throughout the Territory.

The goals outlined within this legislation are consistent with many of the priorities identified in the Virgin Islands Agricultural Plan and reflect the growing public interest in expanding local fruit production. The agricultural community recognizes the value of orchard development and fully supports efforts to increase the availability of locally grown fruit for residents, visitors, schools, processors, and value-added enterprises.

However, while the vision is commendable, serious concerns exist regarding the current readiness and capacity of the Virgin Islands Department of Agriculture to undertake and manage a project of this magnitude.

The bill authorizes VIDA to establish and manage a 30-acre orchard utilizing federal and local agricultural development funds for planning, propagation, irrigation, fencing, staffing, maintenance, and operations. Yet the legislation does not provide a dedicated appropriation or funding source sufficient to support these responsibilities.

The development of a 30-acre orchard is a substantial undertaking that would require significant investments in land preparation, irrigation systems, fencing, propagation materials, planting stock, equipment, labor, pest management, maintenance, harvesting, administration, and long-term staffing. Depending upon the species

selected and the infrastructure required, startup costs could easily reach hundreds of thousands or even millions of dollars before the orchard reaches full production.

More importantly, the Department has not yet received the staffing resources envisioned within the Virgin Islands Agricultural Plan to adequately provide the technical assistance, outreach, education, and producer support services currently needed by the farming community. Farmers throughout the Territory continue to experience challenges accessing timely technical assistance, extension support, program guidance, and agricultural development services.

The reality is that VIDA is already struggling to meet many of its existing responsibilities due to staffing and resource limitations. Assigning the Department an additional responsibility of developing and managing a commercial-scale orchard may further strain already limited resources and potentially divert attention from its primary role of supporting farmers.

The Department of Agriculture should not become a competitor in agricultural production. Rather, its focus should remain on technical assistance, education, research coordination, conservation support, disaster preparedness, workforce development, and strengthening the capacity of existing farmers and agricultural enterprises.

I respectfully suggest that the Legislature consider an alternative approach that may achieve the same objectives while creating broader benefits across the Territory.

Instead of establishing a single government-operated 30-acre orchard, the Legislature could create a Territorial Orchard Development Initiative that supports the expansion of existing orchards and the establishment of new orchards on farms throughout St. Croix, St. Thomas, and St. John.

Such a program could provide grants, cost-share assistance, technical support, and conservation incentives to participating farmers, agricultural organizations, schools, youth programs, and community-based entities interested in developing orchard systems.

This distributed model would:

1. Increase fruit production across multiple islands rather than a single location.
2. Strengthen existing farms and agricultural businesses.
3. Reduce operational and maintenance burdens on the Department.
4. Expand opportunities for youth engagement, workforce development, and farmer participation.

5. Improve climate resilience by dispersing production across multiple sites.
6. Promote agritourism and educational opportunities throughout the Territory.
7. Generate economic activity directly within the farming community.

Numerous federal conservation and agricultural programs already exist to support orchard development and could be leveraged through participating farms. These include practices and systems supported through the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), such as:

- Alley Cropping
- Silvopasture
- Contour Orchards and Other Perennial Crop Systems
- Forest Farming
- Windbreaks
- Water Conservation and Irrigation Infrastructure
- Soil Health and Conservation Practices

These conservation-based orchard systems can simultaneously support food production, environmental stewardship, agroforestry, livestock integration, climate resilience, and agritourism development.

A farmer-led orchard network would allow the Territory to establish and maintain well over 30 acres of fruit production while utilizing existing agricultural expertise, infrastructure, and land resources already present within our farming community.

Therefore, while I support the intent and objectives of Bill No. 36-0087, I respectfully recommend that the Legislature amend the bill to prioritize orchard development through partnerships with existing farms and agricultural organizations rather than requiring the Virgin Islands Department of Agriculture to directly establish and operate a government-managed orchard.

By investing in farmers, supporting existing orchards, and encouraging the development of new orchards throughout the Territory, we can achieve the bill's goals while strengthening the agricultural sector, increasing food sovereignty, expanding economic opportunity, and ensuring that the Department remains focused on its essential role of providing technical assistance and agricultural leadership.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony. I would be happy to answer any questions.