



Monday June 15, 2026

VI Good Food Coalition
Oral Testimony on Bill No. 36 0087

Good afternoon, Chairman Frederick and 36th Legislature's Committee on Economic Development and Agriculture.

My name is Sommer Sibilly Brown, and I serve as Executive Director of the VI Good Food Coalition. Our organization works alongside farmers, fishers, producers, and food system partners across St. Croix, St. Thomas, and St. John to strengthen local food security and food sovereignty.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. I also want to thank the Office of Senator James for advancing a conversation our community cares about deeply: how we feed ourselves.

VI Good Food supports orchard development. We support fruit trees. We support food security. We support the preservation of local and heirloom fruit varieties. We support long term resilience. And our primary mission is to support the advancement of a food system that centers power and access for the people who grow, raise, catch make and eat food.

We support the goal of this bill.

But we do not believe Bill No. 36 0087 can succeed as drafted

Our testimony is not opposition. It is a design intervention. We are here to help strengthen the bill so that it supports farmers, protects local markets, strengthens the proper role of the Department of Agriculture, and moves fruit from trees to the tables of Virgin Islanders.

The question before us is not whether we should increase local fruit production.

The question is how we do it in a way that actually works.

Planting trees is not the same thing as feeding people.

A tree in the ground is not yet food on a table.

Food security requires the full chain: planting, maintenance, harvesting, processing, storage, distribution, and access. If this bill creates a government run orchard without building the rest of that chain, we risk creating more trees without creating more food security.

Our first concern is that VIDA should support farmers, not compete with them.

We do not believe the bill intends to compete with farmers. But without clear guardrails, that could be the result. As drafted, the bill places the Department of Agriculture in the role of grower and seller of fruit.

VIDA's role is to support, develop, and promote the agricultural industry. It should not be placed in a position where it may compete with the very producers it exists to serve.

Farmers asked us to say this clearly: agriculture should be advanced by empowering farmers. That means land access, training, technical assistance, mentorship, infrastructure, and support for the next generation.

Our second concern is capacity.

Our concern is not with the dedication of VIDA's staff. We respect the Department and partner with its staff. Our concern is that the Legislature should not assign the Department a new permanent production mandate without also providing the staff, funding, infrastructure, maintenance, and implementation sequence needed to succeed.

A new mandate should not strain the Department further. It should strengthen the Department's ability to serve farmers.

Our third concern is alignment with the 2021 Agricultural Plan.

The bill cites the Agricultural Plan, but the Plan recommends a 10 acre orchard, not a 30 acre orchard. The Plan also connects orchard development to processing infrastructure. This bill triples the acreage without a dedicated funding plan, staffing plan, feasibility analysis, or full processing pathway.

If the Agricultural Plan is the basis for the bill, then the bill should follow the Plan's scale, sequence, and companion investments.

Our fourth concern is that the bill does not clearly say who benefits from the harvest.

If this orchard exists for food security, then the harvest should be governed by that purpose. The law should say plainly that Virgin Islands residents and local food access come first.

We also ask the Committee to consider what assets we already have. There are existing fruit trees and an existing mango orchard at the Agriculture and Food Fair grounds. Before the Territory plants 30 new acres, we should have a clear plan to harvest, process, distribute, and use the fruit we already grow.

So what do we recommend?

First, protect farmers from government competition. The orchard should not compete with Virgin Islands farmers in institutional or commercial markets. Any demand the orchard could meet should first be offered to local producers.

Second, reposition the first 10 acres as a mother orchard. In alignment with the 2021 Agricultural Plan, the first 10 acres could preserve local and heirloom fruit varieties, produce seed stock and grafted saplings, train young growers, demonstrate management practices, and supply farmers with planting material.

Third, restore the processing and aggregation component. Processing is what helps turn seasonal fruit into food for schools, homes, institutions, markets, and community distribution. This is the difference between planting fruit trees and building a food system.

Fourth, fund it honestly. The funding must match the mandate.

Fifth, phase the project responsibly.

We understand the 30 acre vision. In many ways, 30 acres is the dream. But at this phase, the sequence matters.

A more realistic pathway may be to begin with 10 acres managed or coordinated by the Department of Agriculture, including existing orchard assets. The remaining acreage could then be developed through a distributed network of farmer led and community led orchards across the Territory, supported by government funding, Local Food and Farm Council grants, special projects, conservation resources, and public private small farm partnerships.

VI Good Food is already actively designing work that aligns with this vision, including a managed food forest and diversified orchard model rooted in education, demonstration, long term stewardship, and climate resilience. This is one example of a larger orchard management system that can work across private farm businesses, community based organizations, schools, food system partners, and government.

That level of design should happen at the program level. But the statute should create the conditions for it by expanding the Department's ability to promote, support,

coordinate, and resource farmer led orchard systems, rather than requiring the Department itself to become the producer.

A stronger version of this bill would not stop at one government managed orchard.

It would use public investment to build the foundation for a farmer led orchard network across the Territory.

That is how this bill can move from planting trees to building food security.

That is a bill we would champion.

We respectfully ask the Committee to convene a producer working session before final action and to enter a fiscal analysis and land use analysis into the record before passage.

Thirty acres alone will not carry us to our food security goals. That will take farmers, government, community partners, schools, processors, markets, youth, and residents working together in the right sequence.

Thank you.