



POLICY BRIEF

Bill No. 36-0087 · A 30-acre orchard on St. Croix

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COMMITTEE: Committee on Economic Development and Agriculture, 36th Legislature of the Virgin Islands

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I. Position Summary

VI Good Food supports the goal of Bill No. 36-0087.

We support orchard development — fruit trees, food security, the preservation of our local and heirloom varieties, education, youth training, climate resilience, and long-term agricultural development. We do not, however, believe the bill can succeed as drafted.

Our position is not opposition. It is a design intervention. We recommend that the bill be amended before passage so that it becomes a farmer-first, food-security-first, phased initiative: a mother orchard and food-forest model, paired with processing, that seeds a farmer-led orchard network across the Territory.

The bill should not place the Department of Agriculture in the role of primary producer or seller of fruit. It should instead strengthen the Department's ability to promote, coordinate, support, resource, and monitor a diversified orchard system

that includes farmers, community-based organizations, schools, youth programs, food-system partners, and government.

The 30-acre vision matters — in many ways, 30 acres is the dream. But at this phase, the sequence matters. A stronger pathway begins with the 2021 Agricultural Plan's 10-acre recommendation, includes the Department's existing orchard assets, and then expands through a distributed network of farmer-led and community-led orchards across the Territory.

The five amendments, at a glance

1. **Make it farmer-first** — a non-compete; institutional and commercial demand offered to local producers first.
2. **Make it food-security-first** — the harvest serves Virgin Islands residents and local food access before any off-island or cruise-ship resale.
3. **Make it a mother orchard and processing pathway** — seed stock, grafted saplings, heirloom varieties, training, and shared processing and aggregation.
4. **Make it fundable and phased** — begin with the Plan's 10 acres and expand toward 30 through a farmer-led network, only as funding, staffing, land impact, maintenance, and survival rates are documented.
5. **Design it for our climate** — an advisory, not mandatory, species list matched to the actual site, with required hurricane- and drought-resilient design.

II. The Goal We Share

The Virgin Islands imports the vast majority of its food supply. The Territory has committed to meaningfully reducing that dependence, strengthening local food security, and building a more resilient food system for future generations. Orchard development can contribute to that goal — fruit trees support food security, shade, biodiversity, soil health, cultural memory, youth education, value-added production, agroforestry, climate resilience, and local economic development.

The question before the Legislature is not whether orchard development matters. It is how to structure this public investment so that it actually feeds people, strengthens farmers, uses existing assets, and builds long-term food-system capacity.

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, local market access, and community food access. If the bill creates a government-run orchard without building the rest of that chain, the Territory risks creating more trees without creating more food security.

III. The Questions We Ask

VI Good Food evaluates food and agriculture policy through a consistent set of questions: Who is at the center of this policy? Who benefits, and who carries the burden? Does it strengthen producers and community? Is this the right sequence? Does it build long-term community power? And what gap does it actually fill?

When we apply these questions to Bill No. 36-0087, we find strong intent but a design that needs work. As written, the bill risks placing government, rather than farmers, at the center of food production. That is not the direction our food system needs.

IV. Core Concerns

VIDA should support farmers, not compete with them.

We do not believe the bill intends to compete with farmers — but without clear statutory guardrails, that could be the result. As drafted, it places the Department in the role of grower and seller of fruit. The Department's proper role is to support, promote, develop, administer, and coordinate the agricultural industry — not to own and control food production in ways that may compete with the very producers it exists to serve. Farmers asked us to say this clearly: agriculture should be advanced by empowering farmers,

through land access, technical assistance, training, mentorship, infrastructure, conservation support, business support, market access, and support for the next generation.

Capacity must come first.

Our concern is not with the dedication of VIDA's staff, whom we respect and partner with. Our concern is capacity. The Legislature should not assign the Department a new, permanent production mandate without also providing the staffing, funding, infrastructure, operating support, maintenance resources, and implementation sequence needed to succeed. Farmers asked a simple question: can the Department realistically take on and manage a 30-acre orchard on top of everything it is already responsible for? A new mandate should strengthen the Department's ability to serve farmers — not strain it further.

The bill should align with the 2021 Agricultural Plan.

The bill cites the Plan, but the Plan recommends a 10-acre orchard, not 30 — and it connects orchard development to processing infrastructure rather than imagining the orchard standing alone as a government farming operation. If the Agricultural Plan is the basis for the bill, the bill should follow the Plan's scale, sequence, and companion investments.

The bill needs dedicated funding.

The bill includes no dedicated appropriation; it states only that VIDA may use federal and local agricultural development funds. Those funds are already limited, often restricted, and needed for existing priorities. A mandate without dedicated funding risks becoming another unfunded responsibility the Department cannot properly implement. The propagation capacity may exist; the operating funds do not. If the Legislature wants this project to succeed, the funding must match the mandate.

The harvest must clearly serve Virgin Islands residents first.

If the orchard exists for food security, the harvest should be governed by that purpose. The law should state clearly that Virgin Islands residents and local food access come first, and should not leave open the possibility that publicly

supported fruit is directed toward commercial resale, cruise-related markets, or off-island buyers before meeting the needs of our people. We do not assume that is the intent — but the law should be clear.

Existing assets should be used first.

There are already existing fruit trees, existing legal mandates related to fruit cultivation, and an existing mango orchard at the Agriculture and Food Fair grounds. Farmers urged us to ask: what is happening with the orchards and fruit trees we already have? Before the Territory plants 30 new acres, there should be a clear plan to harvest, process, distribute, and use the fruit we already grow. If we cannot use what we have, more trees may only mean more waste.

V. Lessons for Implementation

Two lessons should guide the Committee as it considers this bill.

Planting is the easiest part of an orchard. Survival, maintenance, harvesting, processing, and distribution are the harder parts.

Tree-planting programs can become what some researchers and practitioners call “phantom orchards” or “phantom forests”: projects that are counted by the number of trees planted, but not by the number of trees that survive, produce, and feed people. The Virgin Islands should avoid that mistake.

For this bill to succeed, success cannot be measured only by acres planted or trees placed in the ground. It should be measured by survival rates, maintenance capacity, fruit harvested, fruit processed, food distributed locally, farmers supported, youth trained, and dollars retained in the local food economy.

That is why we recommend that the bill require maintenance funding, survival-rate monitoring, climate-resilient design, hurricane and drought planning, harvesting plans, and reporting before any expansion beyond the first phase.

The second lesson is that island food systems succeed when farmers are centered in the value chain.

The Hawai'i 'Ulu Cooperative offers a useful model. It did not build food security by creating a government-run orchard. It built a farmer-owned network around breadfruit and other staple crops, paired with shared aggregation, processing, freezing, storage, and market access. That model helped turn seasonal crops into year-round food for schools, institutions, restaurants, and local communities.

The lesson for the Virgin Islands is clear: empower farmers, build shared processing and aggregation, support cooperative networks, and use public investment to strengthen the people already growing food.

We also recommend that the Committee speak directly with local leaders and practitioners who have long been passionate about this work, including Eldridge Thomas and We Grow Food. Their experience with food forests, community land stewardship, agroforestry, and farmer-centered models can help shape a stronger implementation pathway.

These lessons point us toward a better version of Bill No. 36-0087: not a stand-alone government orchard, but a phased mother orchard, food forest, and farmer-led orchard network that is maintained, measured, and connected to real food access.

VI. Recommended Policy Framework

We recommend amending the bill to create a phased, farmer-serving orchard framework with five core components.

Protect farmers from government competition.

Include a farmer-protection provision: the orchard should not compete with Virgin Islands farmers in institutional or commercial markets — schools, hospitals, senior nutrition programs, government buyers, restaurants, hotels, cruise-related buyers, or other commercial outlets. Any demand the public orchard could meet should first be offered to local producers. Public investment should open markets for farmers, not crowd them out.

Reposition the first 10 acres as a mother orchard.

In alignment with the 2021 Agricultural Plan, the first 10 acres should serve as a mother orchard whose primary purpose is to preserve local and heirloom varieties, produce quality seed stock and grafted saplings, train young growers, demonstrate orchard management and climate-resilient design, support irrigation, harvesting, and maintenance education, supply farmers with planting material, and seed future farmer-led orchards. This makes the orchard a public resource for agricultural development rather than a government-operated production farm.

Integrate food-forest and agroforestry design.

VI Good Food is already designing work aligned with this vision — a managed food forest and diversified orchard model rooted in education, demonstration, long-term stewardship, permaculture, syntropic design, and climate resilience. It is one example of one component of a larger system. A strong orchard strategy need not live in one place or be managed by one entity; it can work across private farm businesses, community-based organizations, schools and youth programs, food-system partners, and government. The statute should expand the Department's ability to promote, support, coordinate, resource, and monitor diversified orchard systems, food forests, and farmer-led agroforestry partnerships — without requiring the Department itself to become the primary producer.

Restore processing and aggregation.

The Agricultural Plan did not imagine the orchard standing alone; it connected orchard development to food processing. Processing is what turns seasonal fruit into usable food for schools, homes, institutions, markets, and community distribution — the difference between planting fruit trees and building a food system. The bill should restore this component by connecting orchard development to shared processing infrastructure, clean-kitchen capacity, storage, distribution, value-added production, and local market access.

Phase expansion through a distributed orchard network.

Begin with 10 acres managed or coordinated by the Department — including existing orchard assets — and develop the remaining acreage through a

distributed network of farmer-led and community-led orchards: private farm businesses, community-based organizations, schools and youth programs, farmer cooperatives, food-system partners, government-supported demonstration sites, and agroforestry and food-forest projects. Expansion beyond the first 10 acres should happen through that network, not simply through a larger government-run farm. This approach still moves the Territory toward the 30-acre goal — but in a way that strengthens farmers and can be monitored and measured over time.

VII. Funding and Implementation

Resources should flow directly to farmers and qualified community partners who work with VIDA through public-private small-farm partnerships. Support could include saplings, seed stock, and grafted plant material; irrigation, fencing, soil health, and conservation practices; technical assistance, maintenance, and harvesting; training; and processing, aggregation, storage, market access, and monitoring and reporting.

This could be funded through Local Food and Farm Council grants, special projects, conservation resources, federal and local agricultural development funds where allowable, or another dedicated mechanism. The key is that funding be structured so the work can be monitored, measured, evaluated, and improved over time. A law should not mandate 30 acres all at once without proving the system can support it.

VIII. Proposed Amendment Direction

We recommend that the bill be amended to:

State clearly that the purpose of the orchard is food security, preservation of local varieties, farmer support, education, and local food access.

Align the first phase with the 2021 Agricultural Plan's 10-acre recommendation, and include existing Department orchard assets in that phase.

Define the first phase as a mother orchard, demonstration site, seed-stock and sapling source, and education site.

Require farmer protections so the public orchard does not compete with local producers, and require that institutional and commercial demand be offered to local farmers first.

Restore processing, aggregation, and value-added infrastructure as part of the orchard strategy.

Authorize expansion beyond 10 acres through a distributed farmer-led and community-led orchard network.

Allow public-private small-farm partnerships with farmers, cooperatives, schools, nonprofits, and community-based organizations.

Create or identify dedicated funding — including grants or special projects — that can be monitored and measured, and make funds available until expended.

Require climate-resilient design, and make the 27-species list advisory rather than mandatory, giving the Department agronomic discretion to match species to the actual site, prioritize local and climate-adapted varieties, and require windbreaks, water storage, irrigation, drainage, diversified planting, and post-storm recovery planning.

Require fiscal analysis, land-use analysis, survival-rate monitoring, harvest reporting, and food-access outcomes before any expansion.

Require a producer working session before final action and during implementation planning.

IX. Questions for the Record

Before the bill advances, we respectfully ask the Committee and the Department to answer the following on the record:

What is the current status of existing public orchard assets, including the mango orchard at the Agriculture and Food Fair grounds?

How much fruit is currently being lost for lack of harvesting, processing, storage, labor, or distribution?

Where would the proposed orchard be located?

Would the 30 acres be one contiguous parcel or multiple parcels?

How many acres of government agricultural land are currently available to farmers?

How many acres would remain available if 30 acres were committed to this orchard?

How would this project affect farmers already waiting for land?

What staffing would be required to manage the orchard?

What would the full cost be — land preparation, fencing, irrigation, propagation, maintenance, labor, harvesting, processing, monitoring, and staffing?

What funding source would support the project, and would it be dedicated and available until expended?

How would the orchard avoid competing with local farmers, and who would have first access to the harvest?

How would success be measured — by acres planted, trees surviving, fruit harvested, food distributed locally, farmers supported, youth trained, or dollars retained in the local economy?

X. Path Forward

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.

A mother orchard could preserve local and heirloom varieties, produce quality seed stock and grafted saplings, train young growers, demonstrate management practices, and supply farmers with the planting material they need. That foundation could then support a cooperative network of farmer-led orchards across St. Croix,

St. Thomas, and St. John, connected to shared processing, aggregation, and market infrastructure.

In that model, farmers grow the fruit, farmers share in the value chain, and farmers access the training, planting material, processing support, and market pathways they need — while public investment strengthens local production without turning government into the producer. This approach still moves the Territory toward the 30-acre goal, but in a way that strengthens farmers, uses existing assets, supports community-led management, and can be monitored and measured over time. That is how this bill moves from planting trees to building food security. That is a bill VI Good Food would champion.

XI. Conclusion

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.

VI Good Food is ready to serve as a partner in implementation, not only as a voice at a hearing. We are grateful for Senator James's commitment and for this Committee's attention, and we look forward to working with you to strengthen this bill so that its intention becomes real food security for the people of the Virgin Islands.