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Testimony of Dr. Usman Adamu

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BILL 36-0087

Before the Committee on Economic Development and Agriculture

Thirty-Sixth (36th) Legislature of the Virgin Islands

Fritz E. Lawaetz Conference Room, St. Croix VI

June 15, 2026, at 1:00 pm

Good afternoon, Chairman Frederick and members of the Committee on Economic Development and Agriculture, other members of the 36th Legislature present, other testifiers, members of the press, persons in the viewing and listening audiences, ladies and gentlemen. My name is Usman Adamu, Dean and Director of the University of the Virgin Islands School of Agriculture.

It is indeed an honor for me to appear before this committee to offer testimony on Bill No. 36-0087-An act amending title 7 Virgin Islands Code by adding chapter 16 to require the Virgin Islands Department of Agriculture to establish and manage a 30-acre orchard on St. Croix.

As the bill mentioned that orchard development is specifically identified in the Virgin Islands Agricultural Plan of 2021 as a High Priority Project necessary for long-term agricultural sustainability and economic diversification in the territory, the University of the Virgin Islands School of Agriculture concur with this statement.

The Agricultural Plan Task Force has recommended fruit orchard development project along with an initial implementation budget of $500,000 in the first year, and recurring appropriation of the same amount annually over the duration of the plan. This amount will cover the cost for fencing, land preparation, post-hole digging (augers), tree stocks and pumps, fertilizers, pesticides, and plant maintenance tools.

By definition, a fruit orchard is a planned and managed area where fruit-bearing trees are cultivated for consistent production. Establishing a productive and economically viable orchard is a long-term investment and therefore requires a well-thought-out plan and planning that involves seven key aspects.

#1 Selection of Suitable Land:

- A well-drained, fertile soil with good organic matter
- Access to water for irrigation
- Protection from strong wind

#2 Selection of Fruit Tress:

- Based on climate (tropical or subtropical)
- Market demand and profitability
- Disease resistant and adaptability varieties

#3 Planning Techniques:

- Proper spacing between trees for good sunlight and air circulation
- Use of grafted or high- yielding varieties
- Intercropping with compatible crops for extra income

#4 Irrigation and Fertilization:

- Drip irrigation or sprinkler systems for efficient water usage
- Organic and chemical fertilizers to improve soil fertility

#5 Pest and Disease Control:

- Regular monitoring for pests like fruit flies, aphids, and borers
- Use of organic pesticides and integrated pest management

#6 Pruning and Training:

- Regular trimming to improve shape, air flow, and fruit quality
- Training techniques like trellising for vine fruits

#7 Harvesting and Marketing:

- Harvesting at the right maturity stage for maximum quality
- Proper storage and packaging for sale

Upon review of the twenty- seven (27) fruit trees list in the bill, our School of Agriculture faculty with expertise and experience in the field of horticulture recommended that citrus (Lemon, Lime, and Sweet Orange) should not be included because of the citrus greening disease. Citrus greening is caused by a bacterium, which is transmitted from tree to tree by the Asian citrus psyllid. It is the most destructive disease of citrus and has no known cure or treatment.

The faculty also recommended that mango should be excluded from the list because the Department of Agriculture already has a mango orchard that is not fully utilized. Furthermore, they are concerned about the appearance of competition with existing farmer fruit orchards.

This bill and the territorial Agricultural Plan of 2021 both recognized the role and responsibilities of the Virgin Islands Department Agriculture in establishing and managing the fruit orchard on St. Croix. However, the University of the Virgin Islands School of Agriculture also understands that it has a role to play in this project because of the experts and expertise it has in the field of horticulture and other related sciences.

The school can provide support to the orchard project through technical guidance, capacity building, research assistance, and educational activities essential for long-term success. This support may include expertise in orchard layout and establishment, propagation techniques, variety selection, planting methods, irrigation design and management, fertilization programs, soil health improvement, pest and disease management, pruning and canopy management, harvesting practices, and post-harvest handling.

Additional support can include assistance with developing best management practices for orchards, conducting field demonstrations, establishing trial plots, and facilitating access to improved technologies and production systems. Additionally, support with sustainable agriculture practices, water-use efficiency strategies, integrated pest management, and sustainable nutrient management.

Support may also extend to training programs for the orchard employees, mentorship for new growers, development of operational manuals, and production guides for individual crops.

Additionally, the school may play a role in monitoring orchard performance, evaluating productivity trends, identifying constraints, and recommending corrective actions. Where needed, the school can provide training on data collection, recordkeeping systems, risk-management strategies, and long-term planning to enhance the orchard's sustainability, resilience, and profitability.

Because of the school understanding of the importance of horticulture in agricultural industry in the territory, there is an increased investment and focus in research and extension programming in this field. In addition to an increased investment and focus in horticultural research and extension programs, horticulture also has one of the largest student enrollments in the academic department. The school produced its first set of Bachelor of Science degree graduates in this field during the Spring Commencement of 2026.

In closing, I would like to acknowledge and thank Senator Marise C. James for meeting with me on Friday, June 5, 2026, to discuss the bill and explore the role of the School of Agriculture in the orchard project. The meeting was extremely helpful for me in preparing this testimony. The orchard project was a product of Act No. 8404 that led to the development of the Territorial Agricultural Plan of 2021 of which the School of Agriculture has made significant contribution in that effort. I would like to reiterate the commitment of the School of Agriculture in this orchard project as well and I hope sustain funding will be provided for it.

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today and offer testimony on this highly important bill. I am open to the comments and questions you may have.