



GOVERNMENT OF THE VIRGIN ISLANDS OF THE UNITED STATES

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DEPARTMENT OF PLANNING AND NATURAL RESOURCES

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The Honorable Senator Hubert L. Frederick
Chairman, Committee on Economic Development and Agriculture
36th Legislature of the US Virgin Islands

Good day Senator Frederick, members of the 36th Legislature's Committee on Economic Development and Agriculture, non-committee members and legislative staff present, and members of the viewing and listening public, my name is Dr. Nicole Angeli, Director of the Division of Fish and Wildlife, appearing on behalf of Jean-Pierre L. Oriol, Commissioner of the Department of Planning and Natural Resources (DPNR). As requested in the invitation dated June 20, 2025, I am here to provide an update on our bureaus of fisheries, wildlife, environmental education, as well as issues related to territorial fisheries management and invasive species.

The U. S. Virgin Islands' fishing industry encompasses recreational fishers, fishing charters, commercial fishers, vendors, and buyers. In the most recent completed year (2024), 157 commercial fishers in St. Croix and 135 commercial fishers in St. Thomas - St. John landed over 562,252 pounds of fish at over 30 landings on our islands, fish that is mostly consumed in our communities. Some fish, like wahoo and mahi, are purchased and sold regularly by our restaurants. Our most harvested fish stock is the spiny lobster in both districts, with a total of 156,585 lbs. (STT/J 123,147 lbs.; STX 33,438 lbs.) reported in 2023. Other top species landed in St. Croix include dolphin (mahi), conch, wahoo, and stoplight parrotfish, while top species in St. Thomas - St. John include queen triggerfish (olewife), red hind, yellowtail snapper, and blue runner. Reasons these fish stocks differ include the bathymetry of the ocean floor, the gear types predominantly used in each district, and the composition and configuration of coral reef and seagrass habitats, and consumer demand. All harvests of our fish stocks are below the limits that scientists set for our waters.

Our environmental education outreach spans many stakeholders, reaching all age groups. For the community, the Division allocated in FY24 over \$948,000 dollars in federal funds to a dozen local groups to create nature viewing areas, manage herbivores, create hiking trails, manage high school marine clubs, scholarships for Youth Ocean Explorers and other youth programs, archery training, and freshwater fish inventories across each of our three islands. Annual work on endangered species includes \$50,000 in federal funds in technical assistance for developers and landowners, health assessments for reptiles like sea turtles and VI boas, and survey work on our offshore cays for endangered seabirds. This year, in partnership with agencies like VITEMA, we will offer invasive species training for policy makers, and a rapid response training for better support of our Invasive Species Eradication Community Program. That program collected over 558 snakes for bounties totaling \$37,900 in its first six months. Both Wildlife Control Operators and Removal Agents can still register for the program to volunteer in their community and to create extermination businesses that work with nuisance wildlife; however, the bounty program itself is currently suspended due to lack of dedicated funding. For fisheries business owners, our annual pre-registration meetings

for renewing and new commercial fishers occurred in June 2025 in the St. Thomas-St. John District at the University of the Virgin Islands and in the St. Croix District at the Florence Williams Library. At the meeting, we invite our partners to present, review how to fill out catch reports, distribute new handbooks of the Territorial and Federal Rules and Regulations, and provide notary services to streamline the registration process for fishers. Another form of outreach that we engage in are 200 – 400 free nature excursions for residents on each island annually, provided in coordination with local non-profits and ecotourism companies, including 200 new trips on St. John this year. We are proud to expand the wetland tours, letting local groups offer guided tours into nature and connect locally while thinking of our globally connected migratory birds, fish, and sea turtles.

Every ten years, our state wildlife action plan is updated and congressionally approved to support diverse species selected with local input. This year, for its third iteration, we partnered with non-profits to solicit outreach and feedback on our actions, hearing back from over 60 stakeholder agencies and members of the public, that for the next ten years, the wildlife conservation program will support seven goals, namely (1) mapping wildlife and fisheries corridors to restore 5 acres of degraded habitat, (2) increasing three species' populations by 10% (3) establishing five wildlife disease protocols, (4) offering a certifying training program for fish and wildlife practitioners, (5) increasing funding by 15%, (6) filling 30% of data gaps for Species of Greatest Conservation Need, and (7) supporting private and working lands conservation, meaning farmers and private landowners who want to support biodiversity conservation.

DPNR collaborates closely with our federal partners to ensure that the Island-based Fisheries Management Plans for the District of St. Thomas and St. John and the District of St. Croix are operationalized. This includes entering data into federal databases for each of the nearly 3,700 trips that commercial fishers take each year across the Territory. Approximately 150 recreational fishing charter businesses allow our residents and tourists to explore our waters where pelagic fish like mahi, wahoo, and tuna are harvested. The new recreational fishing license platform GoOutdoorsUSVI was launched in August 2025 to assist with sharing our rules and regulations while tracking total fishing trips in the Territory. Some of our collaboration and advocacy for our fishers includes providing information to the federal government to keep the new minimum fork length size limits for dolphinfish (24 inch) and wahoo (32 inch) reasonable, as well as keeping the bag limits high enough for recreational charters to have fun, with 15 dolphinfish per vessel or 5 per person per day and 10 wahoo per vessel or 5 per person per day in effect since July 25, 2025. This ensures that our recreational fishers will harvest fish at a rate that allows them to have fun and come back for more without overburdening the population.

We have formal and informal means of soliciting input from the public and stakeholders in both districts for wildlife and fisheries issues. We have territorial Fisheries Advisory Committees, federal Fisheries District Advisory Panels, and Caribbean Fisheries Management Council meetings. Our informal interactions with members of the fishing community are vast, as we participate as weighmasters at recreational fishing tournaments, receive and enter commercial catch data reports representing each fishing trip in the Territory, and work with our fishers on public aid programs. We employ fisheries liaisons using funds granted by the Caribbean Fisheries Management Council and we employ port samplers through funding from NOAA to refine methods for weighing and measuring fish landed. We issue over 100 research permits annually for our local scientists at the University of the Virgin Islands, as

well as visiting researchers who are then asked to provide that data back to inform our management objectives.

Lastly, we would like to state that much is known about the fish stocks in our waters and the wildlife on our shores. From surveys conducted by our Divisions of Coastal Zone Management and Fish & Wildlife, within our marine protected areas, at the University of the Virgin Islands, the National Park Service, NOAA, and permitted researchers, we know that we have sustainable fisheries but rapidly deteriorating habitats. Our bird and pollinator populations are trying to sustain their populations, but their habitat is deteriorating. To that end, we are assisting the coral nurseries through grants, technical advice, and permits in our Territory to rebuild coral reefs and understand our ocean waters. The Division supports wildlife rehabilitators, rodent eradication efforts, and reforestation projects including new trails in Red Hook and at Altona Lagoon and birding excursions on St. John. A missing piece in our management toolbox is re-stocking fish and wildlife into our waters and shores. To that end, we are currently developing capacity building programs to demonstrate how we may raise local species for food and to re-stock our fisheries and wildlife populations.

This concludes my testimony, and I am happy to answer any questions that the Committee may have at this time.