



TESTIMONY OF

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MEMBER DESIGNEE, V.I. LOCAL FOOD AND FARM COUNCIL
NOVEMBER 10th, 2025**

**Before the
COMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AND AGRICULTURE
THIRTY-SIXTH LEGISLATURE OF THE VIRGIN ISLAND**

Good afternoon.

I am Harith Wickrema, volunteer president of Island Green Living Association, a non-profit organization dedicated to expanding sustainability and food security in the territory and beyond. I am honored to serve on the Local Food and Farm Council and previously was an Agricultural Plan Task Force member.

The Task Force held that the Agricultural Plan needed to be bold and sweeping in order to usher in a new era of agriculture and food production in the US Virgin Islands. This is the only way to significantly increase agricultural and fishing productivity and economic development locally and make food security and sovereignty a reality. The plan is a strong one, and the Local Food and Farm Council has made substantial strides in its implementation. However, lack of funding has impaired the ability to make those SWEEPING changes that will truly move the needle. I implore the committee to approve the budget in order to support agriculture, our fishers, food security, and economic development.

On behalf of Island Green Living, I want to underscore the importance of investment and support for VIDE's "Seeds of Security" Sustainability & Agricultural Education (SAE).

It is imperative that our children are given the tools, education, and engagement to be future agents of change while supporting their need for fresh, nutritious food today. The SAE, developed by the exceptional VIDE team, led by Cydney Meadows, includes "Seeds of Security" programming. It encompasses age-appropriate agricultural and sustainability content incorporated into curriculum; hydroponics and other school growing systems for hands-on food production, composting, etc. Additionally, Future Farmers of America (FFA) participation and Farm to School fresh produce are vital.

"When students grow it, they eat it." "Seeds of Security" programming not only feeds students' minds and bodies, it also awakens their passion and engagement. It is shown that programs such as "Seeds of Security" lower absenteeism and increase the health of not only students, but the community.

Our students can also be catalysts of change within their families and communities when they share what they learn in school. Increasing home gardening, including the use of container gardening, can go a long way towards supporting food security. Residents don't need a lot of space to grow food, but it can have a significant impact on our reliance on imported food. I myself am able to grow enough food to limit my grocery store visits.

Of course we can't depend solely on students spreading their knowledge. It must be encouraged through dedicated community outreach and education, an element of the Agricultural Plan. As you know, more than 40% of islanders live below the poverty line and currently rely on cheaper, less nutritious imported food. Let's make it a priority to encourage the community to sow the seeds of change. Chaya, which is highly nutritious and easy to grow, would be

an exceptional crop for home gardens. It is similar in taste and appearance to spinach and includes 4 times the protein. It is rich in calcium and vitamins A & C. Increasing community gardens, where islanders have access to land to tend and grow their own food, is essential as well. Feedback from the recent Local Food and Farm Council town halls confirms widespread interest in community gardens.

Bringing on a coordinator is crucial to making these and other Agricultural Plan endeavors a reality. Sommer Sibilly-Brown, who founded and heads V.I. Good Food Coalition, is a treasure in the territory and has been identified for this position. She is already assisting with facets of implementation but can't take on the full duties, providing leadership and accountability, until the job is funded. This position is fundamental to the success of the plan.

Another priority area is increased support for organic and sustainable farming practices in the territory. This will help eradicate harmful pesticide usage, potentially contributing to a decrease in health issues, fewer hospital stays, and increased composting and mulch, thereby reducing organic material from wasting away in landfills and causing fires. Growing and producing healthy, organic food for the Farm to School program is also imperative. Let's ensure our territory farmers and fishers are the ones feeding our children at school.

Additionally, transitioning to organic farming practices, along with other green offerings, will help promote the US Virgin Islands as an eco-tourism destination, complete with quality locavore cuisine and farm-to-table experiences, adding valuable income to our coffers.

Under Mandate 2, The Local Food and Farm Council has initiated a Territorial Organic Agriculture framework and subcommittee, headed by Dr. Nate Olive, a leader in sustainable farming who currently has the only certified organic farm in the territory, Ridge to Reef. Let us make moving toward organic,

sustainable farms a priority and perhaps down the road, become like the state of Sikkim in India, which has made the transition to 100% organic farming.

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to speak in support of the Local Food and Farm Council. There is so much we can accomplish in the territory with your support. Rather than our hard-earned dollars going to those who import food to our territory, let's ensure it goes to our own farmers and fishers. Together let's ensure the territory becomes more self-reliant when it comes to food production, and healthier, physically and economically, reaping a rich and bountiful harvest.