**Testimony Delivered to the Committee on Economic Development and Agriculture**

**36th Legislature of the Virgin Islands**

**November 10, 2025**

Good afternoon, Senator Hubert Frederick, Chairman of the Committee on Economic Development and Agriculture and all other senators present. My name is Louis E. Petersen, Jr., Commissioner of the Virgin Islands Department of Agriculture (VIDA). I am here today, representing both the Department of Agriculture and the Local Farm and Food Council of which I am Co-chair along with my colleague, UVI President Dr. Safiyah George. I am here to offer a very brief testimony in support of that which was shared by Dr. George on behalf of the Council. I will be highlighting concerns, issues, and challenges that are specific to the Virgin Islands Department of Agriculture, and which directly impact its role in the implementation of the USVI Agricultural Plan. Also, with your permission, I will share my time with two farmers who are perhaps in the best position to describe the impact of funding the USVI Agricultural Plan and the hard work of the Local Farm and Food Council. The second part of my testimony will provide a summary of our planning efforts in preparation for the 2026 Virgin Islands Caribbean Agricultural Conference.

In addition to the eight (8) mandates of the Agricultural Plan, The Department of Agriculture has the obligation to execute numerous responsibilities per the Virgin Islands Code. However, during the past several decades both the size and professional capacity of our staff have dwindled. Yet during the same period, our legislative mandates continued to increase. To illustrate even more clearly, one of our long-term employees recently reminded me that when he joined our ranks in 1983 our agency employed 15 heavy equipment operators in the St. Croix District in contrast to our current staff of four (4) operators. In addition to the absolute size of our personnel, other related issues include the steady deletion of critical professional staff positions and the low salary rates. Therefore, the primary challenge of our agency with respect to the Agricultural Plan implementation is our diminished work force.

Examples of professional staff positions which have been deleted from VIDA's personnel listing include the entomologist, plant pathologist, animal scientist, horticulturalist, agricultural or civil engineer, soil and water conservationist, agricultural economist and agronomist. As we plan and look toward our future needs, we anticipate the hiring personnel with skills in grant writing, and employing enforcement officers, additional butchers, heavy equipment operators, heavy equipment mechanics, and laborers -- to enhance our capacity to effectively deliver timely professional services.

I am pleased to share that during fiscal year 2025 we hired an additional heavy equipment operator and an industrial engineer by utilizing our regular annual allotment. In the current fiscal year, we have already hired an additional butcher to enhance our operations at the St. Croix abattoir. Salary increases negotiated in FY 2025 have already been addressed for the majority of our staff. We are actively working to complete all outstanding issues of salary raises and other adjustments by the end of this calendar year.

On page 63 of the Virgin Islands Agricultural Plan recommendation # 3 notes that certain positions that formerly existed in the Department of Agriculture are no longer funded. Therefore, it is recommended [in the Plan] that appropriate funding be provided to the Department of Agriculture on a recurring basis. Pursuant to this recommendation and mandate, VIDA anticipated additional annual funding to incrementally address our staffing concerns and the hiring of the Local Farm and Food Coordinator.

Accordingly, Act 8918, Section 3 as amended by Act 8979, Section 12 provided funding in the amount of $383,000 to hire critical staff for VIDA to support the implementation of the Agricultural Plan in FY 2025. However, to date these funds have not been received. Subsequent to our request for the release of funds, our agency continues to engage in frequent, routine dialogue with the Office of Management and Budget to resolve this issue.

Our team is very cognizant of the fact that we should not be entirely reliant on local funding for the operations of our agency. Based on this awareness, the VIDA Team relentlessly seeks external resources to address the needs of the department. Consequently, we continuously seek and obtain federal funds to support on-going as well as new projects and programs. However, the sustained, long-term staffing of VIDA will require local funding. The Department of Agriculture can ONLY fulfill its mission and assume its responsibility in the implementation of the VI Agricultural Plan when it is fully and professionally staffed. Our capacity to continue seeking external funding also depends upon the level and quality of our team. Rebuilding the agricultural sector of the Virgin Islands requires the rebuilding of the Department of Agriculture.

As was mentioned previously during the testimony delivered by UVI President Dr. Safiyah George, one of the Council's most gratifying initiatives was the execution of the Public Private Partnership Investment project which provided [local] grant funded support and enabled farmers to increase their production, profitability and operational efficiency. Today, I have invited two of those producers [Mr. Ronniel 'Syke' Allembert and Mr. Trevor Warner) who will provide testimony [after my remarks] regarding the impact and value of the funds provided in FY 2024. Unfortunately, no funds were made available for FY 2025, but we are hopeful that we would be able to offer this opportunity again for the benefit of farmers, fishers and our community.

Regarding the Virgin Islands Agricultural Caribbean Conference, our organizing committee meets bi-weekly to plan for the execution of this event jointly with the annual Caribbean Food Crops Society Conference. Our planning committee consists of representatives from the University of the Virgin Islands (UVI) School of Agriculture, the Department of Tourism, and the Department of Agriculture. We propose to convene the joint meetings on St. Croix on July 13 – 17, 2026, inviting off-island guests to arrive prior to the annual Mango Melee and Tropical Fruits Festival which will be held on July 12, 2026. Based on current discussions, the opening session will commence on the day following the festival. Our established theme is "Increasing Food Security in the Caribbean Through Innovative Agriculture."

To date the following subcommittees have been established to distribute responsibilities: executive; logistics and transportation; field trips; public relations and Technology; technical sessions; registration; exhibits; program and publications; reception and banquet, etc.

Pursuant to Act 8306 the sum of $50,000 from the Department of Tourism is to be allocated yearly for the planning and execution of the annual Virgin Islands Agricultural Caribbean Conference. Our planning committee has requested the release of the FY 25 and FY 26 from the Department of Tourism to serve as seed capital. In addition, we are preparing to issue requests for sponsorship support from public and private sector entities. The UVI School of Agriculture and the Department of Agriculture have already pledged monetary support. Our organizing committee will also be seeking federal financial resources to support our efforts. The preliminary estimated budget for the 2026 joint conference is $200,000. Our primary concern at this point is securing adequate funding to effectively execute both meetings.

Attendees at the conference will include, but not be limited to, Virgin Islands farmers, local and regional scientists, colleagues from the U.S. mainland, local educators, students, and policy makers. Although the conference program has not been prepared, possible presentation topic areas will embrace pest management, modern innovations in agriculture, agriculture as a business, self empowerment strategies for small farmers, and agritourism in accordance with Act 8306. Other possible components include a farmers' forum and student-oriented session. As a result of the joint meetings, we anticipate increased territorial and regional collaboration among producers, scientists, academic institutions, and farmers.

In closing, I express sincere appreciation to the Office of the Governor for supporting our agency's programs and projects and also the Office of the Lieutenant Governor. On behalf of the VIDA Team, thank you Senator Fredericks, other members of the committee and the other members of the 36th Legislature for the opportunity to share this testimony. We look forward to your continued support and full funding of VIDA and the Local Farm and Food Council as work together to execute the Virgin Islands Agricultural Caribbean Conference and the mandates of the Virgin Islands Agricultural Plan.

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