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# New Strategies Unveiled to Combat Water Scarcity in U.S. Virgin Islands Agriculture

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**2015 drought on St. Croix. By. ERNICE GILBERT, V.I. CONSORTIUM**

Access to water remains a critical issue for farmers throughout the U.S. Virgin Islands, prompting the Committee on Economic Development and Agriculture to delve into this concern during a recent hearing.

Chair Senator Javan James questioned Louis Petersen Jr., the nominee for commissioner of the Department of Agriculture, on how the department plans to address this significant challenge.

Mr. Petersen explained that the department is working on multiple fronts to improve water access for the farming community. He said the local department is collaborating with the the U.S. Dept. of Agriculture, Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) to create a comprehensive plan

aimed at enhancing water resources. This involves federal funding for water storage, distribution lines, and meters. While acknowledging that this is a long-term initiative, Mr. Petersen emphasized that local agriculture authorities are also pursuing shorter-term projects.

One such immediate project focuses on Estate Bordeaux in St. Thomas, where funds from the Department of Interior are being used to improve water distribution systems for multiple farmers. Mr. Petersen revealed that the nearby wastewater treatment plant, which produces 18,000 to 20,000 gallons of water daily, would be upgraded for agricultural use. However, it was later discovered that the plant already meets the "tertiary" water quality level required for agricultural purposes. To further enhance this initiative, USDA-NRCS will assist in running distribution lines from the wastewater plant to Estate Bordeaux and implement a testing program to maintain water quality.

In addition to the Bordeaux initiative, there are plans to construct large-capacity cisterns at two identified sites within the estate. The department is currently in the process of contracting an engineer to survey the land and assess construction costs for these cisterns.

Another project aims to revitalize a long-neglected 50,000-gallon cistern at Estate Dorothea. The cistern has been cleaned externally and evaluated for leaks. Bids are now being solicited for its full restoration, with the aim to have it operational as soon as possible, benefiting even more farmers than before, according to Petersen.

On St. Croix, the department is tapping into wells located south of its premises to extend lines across the street into community gardens, with the objective of boosting water resources for local farmers.

Petersen concluded by emphasizing that these immediate projects are just the beginning. He assured the committee that more robust efforts, in partnership with USDA-NRCS, are in the pipeline, aiming to provide comprehensive water storage, distribution, and metering solutions for farmers across the territory.