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Farmers with Expired Leases Leave Dept. of Agriculture in Limbo

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Several of the 47 farmers with expired leases with the Department of Agriculture have not signaled whether they intend to renew their agreements, according to D.O.A. commissioner nominee Louis Petersen.

Mr. Petersen was updating members of the Senate Committee on Economic Development and Agriculture on Wednesday, and spoke of the pending lease renewals in the territory – 38 expired agreements on St. Thomas, and 9 on St. Croix.

While some renewals have been approved, “most of these packages are incomplete, as we await supporting documents from farmers,” Mr. Petersen noted. These supporting documents, he said, primarily include “licenses and letters expressing a notice of intent to exercise the renewal

option,” as is required by the terms of the lease.

In response to further questions on the issue from Senator Angel Bolques Jr., Mr. Petersen said that for nine applications, “the documents are just sitting. We’re not sure if they expect an automatic renewal or not.”

Some farmers are unable to sign new leases because the property they are working on has not been surveyed. “I am proud to say that we are working very closely with the Office of the Governor to secure funding for such survey work,” Mr. Petersen stated. “The governor's office actually directed us to my colleague, Commissioner [Lisa] Alejandro at P&P [Department of Property and Procurement] and they have provided some funding for us to begin some survey work.”

He said that the department would be undertaking educational outreach which would “assist farmers regarding those deficiencies, and help them to get where they need to be,” particularly when it comes to what is required to be submitted in the application for a lease renewal.

However, Mr. Petersen said he understands that some farmers may be hesitant to initiate the process of renewing their lease because they are having difficulty securing liability insurance, a scenario he said is of “huge concern.” The department is working with a provider to iron out the details, he assured. “We are trying to see which providers can continue to support our farmers,” Mr. Petersen told lawmakers while noting that the cost of premiums, which he said could range from \$1700 to \$4000, was also prohibitive.

Meanwhile, some leases were not renewed “for lack of productivity and/or compliance with the terms of the agreement,” Mr. Peterson said, while for others, meetings will be required with the leaseholders “to discuss adjustments to the terms of their lease agreements and the implementation of a probationary period.” Following the one-year probationary terms, a final decision will be made, he noted.

Mr. Petersen added that while arrears of up to a year are tolerated by the department, in some cases farmers “simply will not pay and at the same time are not productive. So those are the ones who are clearly slated for non-renewal.”