

# Aging Fleet and Staffing Gaps: Agriculture Department's Dual Dilemma Revealed in Senate Testimony

Government / **Published On September 18, 2023 06:22 AM /**

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In testimony before the Senate Committee on Economic Development and Agriculture on Wednesday, Dept. of Agriculture Commissioner Nominee, Louis Petersen said that a major challenge for the department is keeping up with its equipment and personnel needs.

The fleet of heavy equipment maintained by the department serves to support farmers, assist other agencies, and provide emergency response assistance as necessary, Mr. Petersen said. However, “in some cases, there is a need for minor repairs, while some equipment requires major upkeep. In other instances, our mechanics recommend the replacement of derelict equipment,” Mr. Petersen noted.

On St. Thomas, repairs are underway for all three pieces of heavy equipment on the island, while two major pieces of equipment on St. Croix were awaiting major repairs that would “cost a whole lot,” Mr. Petersen said. The department also needed to purchase two more tractors as well as implements for those tractors. “Of course, this increase in inventory must also be accompanied by an increase in the number of heavy equipment operators,” he remarked.

The water truck acquired from the VI Fire Service some years ago is now “in such disrepair that we don’t think it’s worth repairing,” Mr. Petersen said, noting that the Department of Agriculture was currently awaiting delivery of a new water truck for St. Thomas, which was “being fabricated specifically for the terrain” of the island.

Mr. Petersen told Senator Angel Bolques Jr., in response to a question about the median age of the department’s equipment, that it was difficult to pinpoint, as the range was very wide. However, he noted that the oldest piece of equipment the department owns dates back to 2006. The age of the equipment did not necessarily correlate directly to its ability to function, however. Some that has been in service “for a long time...still function very well,” Mr. Petersen said. “Some that may be brand new...still have an issue.”

As D.O.A. works to ensure that its inventory of heavy equipment is adequate and functional, it is also seeking to fill key vacancies, including for heavy equipment operators, laborers and maintenance staff. Mr. Petersen said the department intends to make compensation for these roles more attractive, to help recruitment efforts. “Our management team will also increase entry-level salaries for some positions, while simultaneously adjusting salaries for staff already filling the same positions by utilizing a portion of our increased funding for fiscal year 2024,” he told lawmakers.

Senator Alma Francis Heyliger commended the move. “When I was hearing their salaries, I’m not gonna lie, I was traumatized,” she remarked, noting that she began to believe retention was an issue when she heard that people were declining job offers from the department. “The first thing that popped in my head was...I wonder if they got a better offer somewhere else.” The senator noted that the territory’s government departments and agencies “don’t seem to be having a happy balance” with ensuring their vacant positions are sufficiently attractive to skilled and talented candidates.