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Beekeeper, Livestock, and Crop Farmers of the Year Honored at 52nd Annual Agrifest

Awards recognize outstanding contributions to Virgin Islands agriculture

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Nelcia Charlemagne **February 20, 2024**

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Thousands attended St. Croix's 52nd Annual Agriculture and Food Fair between Feb. 17-19. By. ERNICE GILBERT, V.I. CONSORTIUM

Steven Charles, Fransisco Dorado and Charles Burton were named Beekeeper, Livestock Farmer and Crop Farmer of the year respectively at the 52nd Annual Agriculture and Food Fair that wrapped up on Monday.

Agrifest is now a best-in-class agriculture event that corrals participants from around the Caribbean. This year, groups from St. Kitts and Nevis, Antigua & Barbuda, and Grenada were just

some of the delegations who brought their products to the three-day fair. BVI Premier Dr. Natalio Wheatley was also in attendance, and he spoke to the Consortium about the importance of Caribbean countries and territories, where conditions are conducive for mass cultivation, to place greater emphasis on sustainability.

According to the Department of Agriculture, all three honorees exemplified this year's theme – "Agriculture: Our Future and So Much More" – with their significant contributions to the territory's agricultural industry.

Congresswoman Stacey Plaskett, who was on hand to recognize the honorees, commended their "dedication and hard work" and noted that "they are indeed at the frontline."

Mr. Charles, a beekeeper for a decade, intends to "expand the bee business" until he can export honey from St. Croix. Meanwhile, officials celebrated Mr. Dorado for who had been involved in farming "since he was born." Despite his family returning to their home country of Puerto Rico, Mr. Dorado remained in the USVI where he raises chickens, horses, sheep, goats, and cattle. Dominican-born Charles Burton, the 2024 crop farmer of the year, was exposed to farming at an early age. He thanked the local government for "getting so involved in agriculture."

This year, Agrifest's Farmers Market was named in honor of the late Gloria Florita Neil-Felix, who had exhibited at the festival for over thirty years before her passing. A former Farmer of the Year, Ms. Neil-Felix was described by Director of Crop Exhibits Orville James as a "farmer, steward [and] virtuous woman whose heart and hands were truly blessed." Over the years, Ms. Neil-Felix would delight customers with fresh mangoes, passion fruits, pumpkin and sugar cane among other crops.

Among a host of other honorees at Agrifest were Melba Diana Williams and Avril Williams, individually recognized for their dedication and service to the territory as food vendors. Both women are regular exhibitors at the Fair.

This year, the livestock pavilion at the 52nd Agrifest was named in honor of the Four H Teen Ambassadors, an organization that has worked closely with the fair for fifteen years. Sue Lakos, Director of Livestock Exhibits, said that though the group is not "directly associated with livestock farming or farmers," they were being celebrated this year for their "dedication and support to make the fair successful" year after year.

The upcoming retirement of Dr. David Hall from his role as president of the University of the Virgin Islands means that this was his last appearance at Agrifest in this capacity, representing a changing of the guard. He was presented with a locally crafted mahogany clock as a token of appreciation for his years of collaboration with the territory's agricultural community. In his remarks, Senate President Novelle Francis reflected on the timeliness of this year's theme. "Now's the time to dream bigger than ever about our goals," he said, reminding listeners of the Legislature's support for "innovation in agriculture and the infrastructure that supports this critical industry." The Legislature previously appropriated some \$2.2 million for the implementation of the [VI Agriculture Plan](#).

For Governor Albert Bryan Jr., this year's theme brought to mind sustainability and his desire to promote the territory's agricultural self-sufficiency. "We are doing things like creating more wells for people...so that we could tap into the water system making water more accessible to farmers," he explained. The government, he added, is "creating funding systems so that farmers can have access to money so that they can participate in the USDA (U.S. Dept. of Agriculture) reimbursement program."

Governor Bryan urged Virgin Islanders across the territory to involve themselves more deeply in developing the agriculture industry. “Sustainability is up to all of us in agriculture. We each need to find a farmer in ourselves,” said the governor. In alignment with Vision 2040, and working through the Agriculture Plan, Mr. Bryan anticipates a 33 percent increase in local agricultural production. Admitting that he was at first concerned about the possibility of achieving that mark, he ultimately deduced that to realize the goal, “we're gonna have to support farmers.”

“We need to teach the next generation because it's all circular,” the governor declared.

Agrifest is held every year on St. Croix at the Rudolph Shulterbrandt Agricultural Complex in Estate Lower Love.

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