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St. Croix Farmers Decry Government Neglect of V.I. Agriculture Industry

Yvette and Dale Brown criticize the slow pace of development and lack of government support in the local agriculture sector during a recent committee testimony

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Yvette and Dale Brown, founders of Sejah Farm on St. Croix. By. V.I. LEGISLATURE

Two well-known local farmers from the island of St. Croix have chastised the V.I. Department of Agriculture for the perceived slow pace of development of the agriculture industry.

Yvette and Dale Brown shared those pointed sentiments as they testified before the Committee on Budget, Appropriations, and Finance on Tuesday. They sought the committee's support for an [extension of a lease of government-owned property](#) where they currently operate a farm.?

According to Yvette Brown who runs Sejah Farm on St. Croix as a full-time endeavor, “agriculture in the Virgin Islands has gained a poor reputation for income generation...and lacking significant social and economic contributions.” This, she contended, is “largely due to the local government’s failure to fulfill its responsibilities to regulate and oversee the agricultural industry.” Ms. Brown lamented that the sector has been “without significant government support for over 59 years.”

The lack of support means “farmers have been left with no choice but to operate in survival mode,” lamented Mrs. Brown. She sounded a clarion call for DOA to get its hands in the dirt, and contribute to changing the sector’s current reputation. Describing the change as both “timely and vital,” Mrs. Brown highlighted a series of knock-on effects of such a turnaround.

“Improving the image of local food availability and accessibility is necessary to attract markets, increase farmers’ income, and develop new market opportunities.” Ms. Brown anticipates these changes would contribute significantly to the local food system and food security. Currently, local food production is only a nominal contribution when compared to the territory’s hefty food import bill. A report by the Iowa State University Food Systems Team highlighted the USVI’s “[overwhelmingly high food import rate](#)” which ranges from 95 to 99 percent.

Without the massive amount of food shipments coming into the territory regularly, the farmer warned that “we do not have the sustenance to maintain ourselves”. “By promoting and supporting local agriculture, we can build a strong, more resilient food economy that benefits everyone within the territory,” Mrs. Brown offered. She also viewed agriculture as a means of creating new employment opportunities for Virgin Islanders.

While the team behind Sejah Farms remains committed to the “resurgence” of the territory’s agricultural sector, Dale Brown remained steadfast in his assessment that the Department of Agriculture is “not up to that challenge.” He recalled the [recent closure of the abattoir](#) in St. Croix, and noted the absence of a “vetted veterinarian,” putting livestock farmers at a “disadvantage.”

After listening to the Browns’ complaints, lawmakers agreed with their analyses. Senator Javan James, chair of the Committee on Economic Development and Agriculture, noted that he intends to hold a committee meeting with the Department of Agriculture in short order. The most recently scheduled meeting was canceled due to the inability of Commissioner Louis Petersen to attend at the 11th hour. “They got away but this time, they better come ready,” advised Sen. James.

For her part, Senator Donna Frett-Gregory expressed disappointment with the slow pace of implementing Act 8716, which established the [Local Food and Farm Council](#). “There are 11 members of that council. Six are government officials and five are appointed. Not one person has come down to the Legislature for approval.” Sympathizing with the Browns, she concurred that “there is no support for the work that they’re doing.”?

Spotlighting St. Croix, Ms. Frett-Gregory insisted that with such “a vast amount of farmland, there is no excuse that we have as to why we have not made this industry a priority.”