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UVI Launches Cutting-Edge Aquaponics and Livestock Research Facilities

New developments aim to fortify local agriculture with sustainable practices and disaster-resistant technologies at the Albert A. Sheen campus

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Assistant Director and Research Assistant Professor of Horticulture and Aquaculture, Dr. Henry Awika, displaying the aquaponics facility. By. TSEHAI ALFRED

On Wednesday, the University of the Virgin Islands unveiled two new research facilities—the Aquaponics Facility and the Agricultural Experiment Station Livestock Facility— during ribbon-cutting ceremony at its Albert A. Sheen campus on St. Croix .

The ceremony was attended by UVI administrators, local elected officials, and a small crowd of faculty, staff, students, and interested members of the community. This first stop was the aquaponics facility, where speakers highlighted the long journey towards the facility's reopening after it was severely damaged during Hurricanes Irma and Maria in 2017.

“This project represents resiliency, food conservation, sustainability,” said Adrienne Williams-Octalien, director of the Office of Disaster Recovery. “These are all of the commitments, the necessary steps that need to happen, in order to be prepared so that when a disaster strikes, we have a plan.”?



UVI administrators and USVI officials cut the Aquaponics Facility ribbon. (Credit: Tsehai Alfred, V.I. Consortium)

After the cutting of the ceremonial ribbon, interim Assistant Director and Research Assistant Professor of Horticulture and Aquaculture, Dr. Henry Awika, gave a tour of the facility. Awika described to those gathered how the facility will raise and breed fish in its tanks, while the water will also be used as a natural fertilizer.

Awika said that he hopes the facilities will provide “relevant research output that the communities can actually benefit from.” Specifically, he said his team is “working on lowering the cost of feed by looking at locally available materials— a plant based diet for the fish— and also looking to reduce the energy cost,” which Awika hopes will especially benefit local farmers. As this hurricane season is projected by experts to be an “[above-normal](#)” one, Dr. Awika also said that his team is currently working on developing structures which can quickly be dismantled and stored and built back up again to prevent storm damage to farm equipment.

The Small Ruminant Livestock Facility, also referred to as the sheep farm, was then presented to community members. Alana Jackson, a former UVI student researcher, said “all of the research that we do is something that we want to apply to the community. We have initiatives where we reach out to farmers and sell sheep for breeding and for meat.”

Vicente Cotto, a local entrepreneur who is interested in agriculture, said that the presentation of the events piqued his interest in the industry. “Every time you start something new, there are a lot of hiccups, a lot of undiscovered things that could stop you. These research facilities, what they do, is smooth out a lot of that so that we the farmers....don’t have to meet the same headaches,” Mr. Cotto said. After attending the event, he described the new facilities, as well as the other opportunities UVI offers as “hidden gems” that “more people should take advantage of.”

