

logo not found or type unknown

Virgin Islands Farmers Learn About Federal Support at Plaskett-Held Webinar

Congresswoman Plaskett engages farmers with information on funding opportunities, aquaculture training, and policy advocacy

Agriculture / **Published On June 28, 2024 06:48 AM /**

Tsehai Alfred **June 28, 2024**

Image not found or type unknown



The office of Congresswoman Stacey Plaskett held a Farmer's Forum webinar on Wednesday, informing local farmers of available programs and policies, as well as recent initiatives made by the congresswoman to support and grow the industry.

According to Ms. Plaskett, the Forum was one of many steps in months-long discussions between agricultural organizations and the congresswoman's office, which were aimed at discussing collaborative funding and assistance that the territory can provide to local farmers. After an earlier agriculture roundtable with community stakeholders highlighted opportunities— such as RTPark's facilities, including conference rooms and printers being available for the use of local farmers—

the Congresswoman's office then hosted many of the organizations on a tour of the Bordeaux Farmer's Market and other local farms to better understand the specific needs of farmers in the territory. Several of those organizations returned to the agricultural discussion months later, participating as panelists in the forum.

“They had the opportunity to observe innovative agricultural practices, engage with local farmers, and see firsthand implementation of advanced farming techniques aimed at increasing productivity and sustainability,” Congresswoman Plaskett said in her opening remarks on Wednesday, describing what the organizations learned from the previous farm tours.

Webinar panelists included Lekeisha Hood Moïs, USDA State Director for Florida and the Virgin Islands, Rudy O'Reilly, USVI District Conservationist, Frank Velasquez, Acting Caribbean Area Director of USDA Natural Resources Conservation Services, and Frank Dixon, State director for the Virgin Islands Apex Accelerator.?

While USDA representatives informed farmers about available grants and programs, such as opportunities to support irrigation system improvements, and higher funding rates for historically underserved farmers, the V.I. Apex Accelerator— administered by the Office of Small Business Programs and under the University of the Virgin Islands— said they help local farm businesses understand grants and governmental contracts through one-on-one counseling. USDA Rural Development representatives also said that many of their federal programs are particularly applicable to Virgin Islands farmers, including food system initiatives that aim to close supply chain gaps.?

During the question and answer session, local farmers in attendance expressed interest in support for aquaculture and farming education in public schools. “We are trying to develop it, crossing fingers that everything goes well. We will have a hurricane this season. We should be able to be either ready by fiscal year '25 if not fiscal year '26,” Frank Velasquez said, responding to questions from local farmers about available programs for aquaculture, which he said are only currently available at the national level. However, training in aquaculture may soon be available to farmers in the territory.

Former Senator Genevieve Whitaker, who attended the webinar, suggested to the congresswoman's office that the territory implement a system where all local farmers can receive assessments and report concerns. “We can get a better sense of all the individual farmer needs, and then we work with all the stakeholders, locally and the federal level to then address the various issues,” Ms. Whitaker said.?

While some of the interests raised by the farmers are not yet being addressed through programs and policies, Ms. Plaskett says that she is continuing to advocate for “sustainable farming, climate change adaptation, and advancements in agricultural technology.” According to Ms. Plaskett, she is proposing that the grant limit for farmers be increased, among other measures. “As we move forward with these initiatives, I recognize the importance of bridging policy to practice,” the congresswoman said.

Despite years-long sentiment from farmers that the industry has largely been neglected, those in attendance on Wednesday said they found the forum helpful in navigating available support for agriculture. “As a local farmer, I appreciate this information,” Ramone Reid commented during the webinar.