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Dept. of Agriculture Unveils Plans for St. Thomas and St. Croix Abattoirs Amid Prolonged Closures Impacting Livestock Farmers

Commissioner Petersen outlines immediate and long-term strategies to address maintenance issues and improve facilities, including the introduction of a mobile abattoir unit and a \$1.2 million rehabilitation project

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Agriculture Commissioner Louis Petersen. By. V.I. LEGISLATURE

For the [second year in a row](#), the territory's underfunded and deteriorating abattoirs occupied the concerns of the Senate Committee on Budget, Appropriations and Finance during the Department of Agriculture's budget proposal defense.

Speaking to lawmakers on Thursday, Agriculture Commissioner Louis Petersen said, “one of our greatest challenges continues to be our aged abattoir facility on St Croix.” Since February 2020, there have been 3 documented closures of the facility. First, the facility was closed due to citations by the U.S. Department of Agriculture and reopened with a [ribbon-cutting ceremony](#) in August of the same year. In 2022, renowned Crucian farmer Dale Browne of Sejah Farm accused the V.I. Department of Agriculture of [failing farmers](#), as the abattoir was once again closed. At the end of April this year, the abattoir was abruptly shuttered following a routine inspection that revealed [significant maintenance issues](#). On July 29th, VIDA [issued a notice](#) of the facility’s impending reopening.

According to Mr. Peterson, the department is “diligently and methodically working to resolve the four primary areas of concern at the abattoir.” They include replacement for a faulty boiler. “The start date for the installation of the boiler is today, as we sit here and speak,” he reported. A new ramping station has already been installed, and “a selected vendor is preparing to purchase and install a new hoist for the abattoir,” noted Mr. Petersen. “All of the rusted steam pipes, which are approximately 50 years old... must be replaced.” Pipe installation is currently in progress.?

As for St. Thomas, Mr. Petersen told lawmakers that “our revised plans include the renovation of the existing abattoir as a long-term initiative.” A review of a structural condition survey conducted by the Department of Public Works prompted VIDA to consider a different approach. Previously, there were considerations to fully demolish and rebuild the structure. During the last budget exercise, senators were apprised that the department had decided to use a mobile abattoir unit in the interim. After a year, during which there was consultation with a team of experts, the department has identified a potential vendor and is lining up the purchase. “Our proposal for funding has been fully and properly vetted and funding released by the Office of Management and Budget,” Mr. Petersen said while providing his prepared testimony.

Later in the discussion, however, the status of the funding seemed less clear. “How realistic is this mobile abattoir? And if it is truly realistic, when do we envision that we’ll see this coming online?” queried Senator Donna Frett-Gregory. In response, Mr. Petersen disclosed that the unit will cost approximately \$900,000, with funding coming from the American Rescue Plan Act. The application for funds is in the vetting process. “I remain confident that at the end of the process, we’ll be funded,” he told Ms. Frett-Gregory.?

The mobile abattoir would be implemented in the short term, Mr. Peterson said, to be put in place “as soon as possible for the use of the farmers.” The timeline, however, remained unclear. In the long term, VIDA anticipates spending “approximately a million dollars to rehabilitate the abattoir.” The commissioner reported that VIDA has submitted a request for \$1.2 million in federal funding through the Office of Congresswoman Stacey Plaskett.

VIDA is in receipt of \$500,000 in insurance payouts from the Federal Emergency Management Agency for the St. Thomas abattoir following the 2017 hurricanes. Ms. Frett-Gregory suggested that those funds be put toward the restoration of abattoir services on St. Thomas. In fact, she encouraged the department to “look into all of the funding that’s available within your department for the abattoir in this district.” According to Assistant Commissioner Riise Richards, the acquisition of the mobile unit is “prudent” for the department. “Once we rehabilitate the present structure, [the mobile unit] can be relocated, probably on the island of St. John, to attend to their needs.”

Meanwhile, Senator Javan James was interested in the challenges at the St. Croix abattoir and wanted to ascertain how much had been spent on repairs and maintenance over the last four years.

“We cannot continue to operate like this. Our farmers need to get rid of their livestock in a timely manner,” he scolded Mr. Peterson. He posed questions on the availability of replacements for damaged inventory and VIDA’s relationship with contractors who could repair components within the facility. “I’m asking these questions because when we give you the resources, we want to see results.”

Mr. James was disappointed by the slow progress with repairs to the St. Croix facility, particularly as Mr. Peterson confirmed the availability — though limited — of inventory, and a good working relationship with contractors. “We can't fix a simple abattoir to feed our people,” he bemoaned.

This year’s conversation about how best to return to having two – or even three – functional abattoirs in the territory came against the backdrop of a budget for the next fiscal year that had been slashed by almost a quarter. “The FY2025 budget of \$6,327,890 is a decrease of 24.42% compared to FY2024,” Mr. Petersen testified. The total figure includes a request of \$5,327,889 from the general fund. Salaries, fringe infrastructure, repairs and maintenance account for most of VIDA's projected expenditure. Another \$570,930 from the general fund allocation will be used for the “other services” category, which includes \$75,384 for repairs and maintenance. Additionally, the department expects to receive from federal funds totalling \$2,054,777, and non-appropriated funds of \$270,805, for an overall FY2025 budget of \$9,274,257.