

## Food and Farm Council Urges Lawmakers to Release Funds, Citing Delays That Have Stalled Key Agricultural Programs

**The V.I. Food and Farm Council is urging lawmakers to release delayed funds and approve over \$3 million in FY26 requests, warning that stalled appropriations have paused grants, delayed hiring, and hindered implementation of the agricultural plan.**

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The Virgin Islands Food and Farm Council is pressing lawmakers to release critical funds previously appropriated for agricultural development, warning that continued delays are stalling programs, personnel hiring, and long-term growth in the territory's food system.

Appearing before the Committee on Budget, Appropriations, and Finance on Friday, Dr. Safiya George, who represented the Council, laid out the persistent financial hurdles. Despite a \$1.4 million appropriation under Act 8918 to support the implementation of the Virgin Islands Agricultural Plan, Dr. George testified that “unreleased funds” remain a “critical issue that has hindered implementation.”

Among the key concerns are two separate \$500,000 appropriations: one for the launch of a Public-Private Partnership Investment Fund and another for the Virgin Islands Economic Development Authority (EDA) to establish a Farmers' Grant Matching Fund. However, the EDA has reportedly “not yet received [the] FY2025 appropriation,” and communication with the Office of Management and Budget is still ongoing.

The Council is also experiencing what George called “critical staff hiring funds issues.” Although \$383,000 was eventually made available to the Department of Agriculture to bring on “essential personnel,” including the Local Food and Farm Coordinator, “funding has not yet been released,” and “a formal update on its status is still pending.”

These funding delays, George said, “have had a direct and tangible impact, most notably in pausing the second cycle of the grant program for farmers and fishers and delaying the hiring of the coordinator.” She stressed that “the success of the agriculture plan depends on collaborative follow-through.”

Despite the setbacks, the Council has moved forward where possible. It has disbursed \$485,567 to 11 applicants through the Public-Private Partnership Investment Fund and is now requesting an additional \$1 million to expand the number and size of awards for “high-impact shovel ready proposals.”

In addition, a \$250,000 appropriation to the University of the Virgin Islands Agriculture Business Center enabled the support of 24 active clients and the completion of several workshops, including those focused on soil management. The Council is seeking the “continuation of \$250,000 [to] the Agribusiness Center,” which George described as a “vital resource hub for farmers and fishers.” According to her, the funding will help “sustain the current operations, retain key staff and continue providing consistent territory-wide services.”

Beyond that, the Council is requesting \$300,000 to support its own operations and implementation strategy. That amount, George said, will “ensure that the Council can sustain administrative function and staffing.” An additional \$150,000 is being sought to support “organic agriculture across the territory.” Those funds would provide “education, technical assistance and resources for producers exploring or transitioning to organic methods.”

To pursue competitive national funding, the Council is also asking that \$250,000 be appropriated to the University of the Virgin Islands Office of Sponsored Programs. The goal is to secure major federal grants that address water irrigation infrastructure and other agricultural needs. According to George, the office plays a key role in pursuing grants related to “climate resilience, agricultural infrastructure and workforce development.”

The Council’s broader staffing needs were also addressed, with a request for \$400,000 to hire personnel including a local food farm coordinator, soil scientists, water and soil conservationists, a plant pathologist, and a civil engineer.

Senator Kurt Vialet raised questions about the staffing requests, specifically whether existing federal grants to the Department of Agriculture could be used to cover salaries. Agriculture

Commissioner Louis Petersen responded that they could not. When the senator inquired about the need for an in-house civil engineer, Petersen acknowledged that while the Department of Public Works has assisted in the past, “when it comes to major projects, they have limited time and expertise because they have full-time projects themselves.” Having a civil engineer on staff would be “efficient,” he said.

George explained that the Council’s budget requests represent its “immediate FY 26 budgetary priorities.” She told lawmakers, “Legislative investment in these priority areas will allow us to build on demonstrated success, meet overwhelming community demand, and deliver stronger outcomes.”

Friday’s hearing included limited discussion on the Council’s roughly “\$3 million” request. Senator Hubert Frederick asked, “If we can't get that number, what number can we try to get?” The Council did not immediately respond. Framing his question in light of the “current budgetary environment,” Frederick stated, “What we want and what we could afford is two different things.”

Still, Frederick agreed that the funding is “necessary” and echoed George’s sentiment that “unfunded mandates aren't a good thing.”