

The Virgin Islands Consortium

‘He Doesn’t Happen to Be Black’: Distillery Counsel Raises Race in Zoning Fight

During testimony on Bill 36-0211, Prosperity Farm’s attorney said community opposition cost St. Croix “hundreds of millions of dollars” in investment and suggested blame toward his client stems from the fact that “he doesn’t happen to be black.”

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Attorney Kevin Rames. By. V.I. LEGISLATURE.

Thursday’s meeting of the Committee on Disaster Recovery, Infrastructure, and Planning featured a bold assertion that opposition to the operations at Prosperity Farm Distillery was, at least in part, founded in racial bias.

Attorney Kevin Rames, legal counsel for the business, argued that proposed investments and developments for the island of St. Croix have been stymied due, in part, to pushback from community organizations.

“Do you know how many hundreds of millions of dollars in capital investment that was lost on St. Croix because of this kind of attitude?” Mr. Rames asked lawmakers.

“Hundreds of millions of dollars of investment because of groups like the St. Croix Environmental Association, like the League of Women Voters ... like very well-meaning, 501 (c) (3), who say repeatedly, ‘I don't oppose economic development, but not here, not there, not there, not there, and not there’,” Mr. Rames declared.

Mr. Rames had spent much of the meeting defending the operations of Prosperity Farm Distillery. He was invited to testify on Bill 36-0211, which seeks to allow microbreweries and microdistilleries in land zoned for agricultural and residential use.

Among its many offerings, the business produces six alcoholic beverages on land that it zoned for agricultural use. The relevant law prohibits the production of rum on agricultural land, but according to Mr. Rames, Prosperity Farm produces gin, vodka, and other spirits — not rum.

Prosperity Farms Distillery has, evidently, found loopholes in the relevant laws, including those that mention agri-tourism with no clear definition of what that term entails.

“When you're a businessman and you've invested \$18 million in the development of a business, and you see a law that says you can do agro tourism, are you going to self-limit? No, of course not,” the attorney told committee chair Senator Marise James. He informed Senator Novelle James, as well, that the Farm is involved in “agricultural processing,” stopping short of calling it distillation.

“If you want to change the law, change the law, but right now, it says you can do agricultural processing on your farm. How do you agriculturally process cane?” he asked, another nod to a loophole.

Sen. James was perturbed. “When you make a statement like that, it makes the public think that you'll stretch it to right before it becomes criminal,” she said.

Environmentalists and community activists have blamed Prosperity Farm Distillery for wastewater discharge that polluted Prosperity Beach in October 2025. According to Alice Charles, DPNR testing revealed elevated levels of enterococci bacteria in a rust-colored water that flowed from the Prosperity area and onto the beach. While Ms. Charles believed that the dark colored water was vinasse (a liquid residue from sugar cane processing and distillation), Mr. Rames dismissed those allegations.

“There has been one finding made of an issue of environmental degradation,” Mr. Rames argued. He informed lawmakers that the bacteria identified at Prosperity Beach “comes from the intestines of men or animals.”

“There has never been a finding that vinasse has been on William and Punch Beach. There has never been a finding that vinasse has been at Rainbow Beach. There has never been a finding that the vinasse has been at Prosperity Farm Beach,” Mr. Rames maintained. He dismissed what he called “representations.”

According to Mr. Rames, there is another motive at hand. Claiming that there are “thousands of gallons of black water” on a nearby property, he argued that the blame is unfairly being placed on his client.

“It's gotta come from where the guy who has challenged melanin, that it has to be his fault. It has to be his fault, okay? Because he's got money and he doesn't happen to be black,” Mr. Rames declared.

His accusation, made in his closing remarks, was not acknowledged by lawmakers or other testifiers. Instead, during testimony on behalf of People Protecting Places, Alice Charles noted that “our people are tired of seeing laws bent to accommodate whoever has the money to hire lawyers and lobbyists.”