

The Virgin Islands Consortium

V.I. Faces Meat Sales Halt In September

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There could soon be a halt on the sale of meat in the Virgin Islands if the Department of Agriculture fails to comply with federal standards by September, DOA Commissioner Louis Petersen Jr. said on Friday.

Speaking with senators who sit on the Finance Committee, Petersen said the DOA's aging meat inspection plants could be shut down if they fail federal inspection by the regional U.S. Department of Agriculture's Office of Food Safety Inspection Service.

Petersen, for his part, said such a closure should not be allowed to happen.

"Technically, our abattoir plant can be shut down for non-compliance," Petersen said. "However we cannot afford such a closure since by law, all meat sold or used for

commercial purposes in the territory must be slaughtered or processed in our federally inspected plants."

Even as Petersen confirmed that federal inspectors would be in the territory in September, he highlighted concerns the abattoir division has as it relates to safety, physical infrastructure and, most importantly, staffing.

"According to those guidelines we are currently out of compliance and additional staff is needed to address this deficiency," Petersen added.

The Department of Agriculture on Friday requested a budget of \$2,450,613 for fiscal year 2015. 21 percent of the budget is allocated to the abattoir department, which represents the second largest recommended expenditure, falling just under administration.

DOA has overtime lost indelible staff positions and has not been able to fill them. Petersen also revealed that many of his already overworked staff had to perform triple duties to keep the department running, including his supervisors and directors.

"In general, staff morale and productivity have been negatively impacted as a result of low, stagnant wages and overworked conditions due to staff shortages," Petersen said, adding that staff members were left with no other choice but to seek second jobs.

Asked by Senator Nereida Rivera O'Reilly why his department hadn't requested more funding, Petersen said he was aware of the financial ills the territory is currently facing, and did not want to advocate special treatment when all other departments were seeing their budgets trimmed.

When miscellaneous funding is excluded, DOA is facing a four percent decrease in funding, Petersen revealed.

Senator Terrence Nelson called on fellow colleagues to find funding to increase the department's revolving fund, while committee chair Senator Clifford Graham found it disappointing that Petersen had to rely on revolving funds to meet the department's daily needs.