

The Virgin Islands Consortium

St. Croix Students Tour Agriculture Grounds For National Agriculture Week

VIC News / **Published On March 18, 2015 11:11 PM /**

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As part of the annual recognition of the agriculture industry, the Virgin Islands Department of Agriculture is celebrating National Agriculture Week themed, "Agriculture: Sustaining Future Generations" and hosted an open house Tuesday at the Rudolph Shulterbrandt Agriculture Complex on St. Croix to introduce the public to the department's operations, with highlights including heavy-equipment demonstrations and the slaughtering of a single sheep in the department's on-site abattoir.

Commissioner-designee Carlos Robles welcomed about 200 students from public, private and parochial schools across St. Croix to the event on Tuesday.

"Many of you have been here before for other instances, but today you're going to get to see agriculture and agriculture alone," he said.

He told the large group they would have the chance to see how some of the meat products their parents purchase at local supermarkets are processed "so that you can eat



Students gather around as

meat is processed in abattoir

"I know many of you just visited here during the Ag Fair only and you think that's all we do, is prepare for the Ag Fair; that's not true," said assistant commissioner, Luther Renee. "We do a lot more. We have a nursery, we have an abattoir, we have a garage, we have a number of things that you will see as you walk around today."

After some housekeeping, the youngsters were off to explore the agriculture grounds. CJM Homeschoolers and Evelyn M. Williams Elementary students could be seen observing the operation of the department's heavy equipment and machinery.

Then, it was on to the abattoir to witness the processing of meat, from the slaughtering of the animal to the preparation of the meat for sale. But, before the demonstration, *VI Consortium* spoke with seventh and eighth-grade students enrolled in the Elena L. Christian Junior High School Future Farmers of America (FFA) club, under the leadership of Mr. Farrelly.

"Farming is interesting because everything that surrounds us is mostly about farming and it's how we got here. And agriculture has something to do with hands-on experiences and I like that kind of stuff," said eighth-grade student, Saker Saker.

Trey Francis, the club's vice president, said it was good for his group to take the trip because "agriculture is not just about planting seeds, it's also about the animals that are here and we can see the process before they sell to the public."



L2R: Assistant Agriculture

Commissioner Luther Renee, guest, and Agriculture Commissioner-designee Carlos Robles at Agriculture Week event, March 17

Francis went on to say that as a first-year FFA student, he is learning that "agriculture is all around us."

"Agriculture is one of the most important things in life," the seventh-grader added.

Several of the young ladies in the group expressed a desire to pursue careers in agriculture.

"I would be happy to have a career in agriculture like fashion designing or as a chef," said eight-grade student, Sathi Bethelmy. She pointed out that fashion goes hand-in-hand with agriculture because "you have to know where your clothes come from. You make shirts out of cotton and there is also silk."

"The career I expect is agribusiness, being able to own my own clothing line, but what I'm going to do is take agriculture and connect it by growing [the products] to make my material, and then maybe I can use that material to make my clothes," said Enperatriz Delgadillo.

The eighth-grader said her interest in the field of agribusiness developed after attending a program at a Mississippi university.

"At first, I wanted to be in the business industry, then, I was sent to Alcorn State University and they exposed me to more career options and I was shown that business can be connected to agriculture," she explained.

Mikhala James said her career interest in agriculture has to do with wanting to create her own line of organic beauty products.

"People are allergic to certain products and some makeup may cause certain skin types to break out," the eight-grader said. "I want to have a product that could make your skin better and it be organic. Some leaves and herbs like mint, all those natural plants, could really help others."

Before entering into the abattoir, Alieshla Beras said she was looking forward to the experience.

"I want to see how meat is prepared for us and how it gets to the market for people to be fed," the eight-grader said.

Students crowded into the medium-sized room to see the process of bringing meat to market. They witnessed the shooting of a single sheep, which took place in what is called a 'blood pit' in addition to the animal's subsequent skinning, and then its opening to



Evelyn M. Williams Elementary

students observe heavy equipment demonstration

"They hang it because they have to bleed it out; all animals must be bled out before it gets to the butcher, Mr. Canton," explained Angela Belardo, quality control inspector.

Belardo said the department provides slaughtering services for local farmers twice a week. On Mondays, cattle, sheep and goats are processed and on Tuesdays, pigs are processed. She said farmers sell the meat either to local supermarkets or to their private customers.

She also pointed out the federal USDA inspector observing the procedure.

"We don't have an inspector here right now, so he comes over, inspects the meat, so you can see you'll be getting a wholesome product when it leaves the abattoir," she said, adding, "Whenever you see 482 stamped on meat packaging in the supermarkets, that's from the St. Croix abattoir."

A similar open house event was held at the Sanderilla Thomas Bungalow in downtown St. Thomas on Wednesday and on Friday, Robles will wrap up the week-long celebration with lectures at the Julius E. Sprauve and Giff Hill schools on St. John.

"I want to thank tourism for their partnership, they're doing a wonderful partnership with us because we have a lot of things in common and we have the same goals in a lot of different areas," Robles said. "In addition, the cooperative extension services at UVI and the farmers, we can't do it without them."

Feature Image: L2R: Mr. Canton begins butchering process of goat, students tour nursery, and CJM Homeschoolers look on at heavy equipment demonstration

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