

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Robles Says Agriculture Will Do The Best It Can With \$2.7 Million Budget

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With a \$1 million reduction to its original budget of \$3.7 million, Agriculture Commissioner-designee Carlos Robles says he plans to do the most he can with what he's been given.

VI Consortium caught up with Robles this week during National Agriculture Week celebrations at the Rudolph A. Shulterbrandt Agricultural Complex on St. Croix.

"We'll work with what we have. My budget is now down to \$2.7 million. All the departments got a budget cut about two Tuesdays ago. It was \$3 million," Robles explained. "I'm going to have to leverage what we have with other partners. It could be a

lot more, but we'll work with what we have and go as far as we can with the resources that are available to us."

Robles made the revelation while discussing his plans to raise the profile of agriculture in the territory.

"The department has its mission and "Farmer's First" has always been its slogan, and we're going to keep that," he said. "But I'm adding to this mix that I want to see more homegrown products on the tables of Virgin Islanders. How am I going to get that achieved? We're going to have to increase production. We're working toward increasing production on government property."

And the first step, Robles said, is the large-scale assessment of government land that is currently underway.

"Right now, we're assessing all the government property that we have. We're going to digitize the entire process so that it becomes electronic. We're going to involve young people in that process of digitizing and making sure that we map every piece of land that's under the Department of Agriculture's jurisdiction."

While he did not provide a time frame for the completion of the land assessment, Robles said following that process "we're going to work toward making sure everyone has their leases and then we're going to work toward continuing education for farmers so that we now begin to look at this thing as a business."

And that would bring him to his ultimate goal -- increasing the production of agricultural goods in the territory.

"The markets are there; we don't have an issue with markets. The supermarkets will take it if it's on a regular, consistent basis and the quality is up. The hotels will take it, again, on regular consistency," Robles said. "So, my goal is to work on the back end in working with our producers to get their production up to a level where they will be able to bring homegrown fruits, vegetables, herbs and meats to the community on a regular, consistent basis."

Robles said he desires to see more locally produced food on the plates of residents and visitors.

"I want to be able to have Virgin Islanders and guests, at least twice a week, when they look at a plate of food, that at least a third of it was grown in the Virgin Islands," he said, "and in order to do that, we have to work on getting the production end up. And that's what we're working toward now."

Relative to supplying the territory's school lunch program with local food, Robles said it's something on his radar.

"Children eat a lot and they also waste a lot," he began. "One of the things we're going to do, and I've already began having discussions with the Department of Education and the school lunch program, is to begin working local food into their menus. They've already started with one particular farm, but we still have a ways to go."

In fact, Robles said there is funding available for his department as it partners with the Education Department.

"We've already discussed with them and they've shared with us that there is funding available and the more local produce they can purchase, the bigger the pot of money the federal government is able to give to us to procure local foods," he explain, adding, "Again, the markets are there it's just working with our producers to get their production up to a consistent and regular basis in order to be able to meet the demand for local production."

In the long term, Robles says he even has plans for the excess production of local fruit.

"The next ultimate phase is to be able to find somewhere of getting a large-scale processing, where people who have backyards full of mangoes and or any other fruit, they can have a central place where they can sell their produce to someone who is in the business of making value-added products and they can then turn them into jellies, drinks, or preserves," he said. "My wish list is that at some point in time, they will be able to produce enough that people can take gift baskets back to the mainland as part of our tourism offering."

Then turning his attention to the activities of Agriculture Week, Robles said it is important to introduce children to agriculture early.

"Children know if they want to get carrots, chicken wings, eggs, they go to the supermarket to get them. What this does is it brings the connection back to the land itself. It gives them an opportunity that if they've never seen how the products get to the store, this makes the connection. This helps to bring the whole picture as to how food is produced and consumed and people need to see that so they have a greater appreciation for those involved in production and or distribution of agriculture commodities," he said.

On Friday, Robles will give presentations to students at the Julius Sprauve and Giffit Hill schools on St. John.

While he acknowledges the extensive work ahead of him with a very limited budget, Robles says he looks forward to the challenge.

"I'm excited and I have the governor's support, both financially and morally, and I'm just looking forward to what's going to happen over these next four years," he concluded.

Image Credit: Virgin Voices