

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Drought Relief On The Way; But Farmers Losing Patience

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ST. CROIX -- Carlos Robles, commissioner of the Department of Agriculture met with farmers, business owners and concerned citizens at UVI's Great Hall Wednesday night to give an update on the drought situation and the government's progress in convincing the Secretary of Agriculture to declare this island a disaster area.

'That information now has been submitted to the Secretary of Agriculture and we are awaiting word back from him," Robles said. The commissioner also made known that Governor Kenneth Mapp had signed a measure that appropriated \$500,000 to DOA and that the check was working its way "through the channels," however he could not give a definite date as to when it would become available.

Once the funds arrive, Robles said he plans on traveling to Puerto Rico along with four members of his staff to "begin the process of looking for additional hay." He added that the existing hay fields the department currently holds will be exhausted in the next week



Dept. of Agriculture Commissioner Carlos

Robles speaking to farmers at the UVI Great Hall on Wednesday night.

Aside from hay, DOA intends to repair its freezer, purchase a 4000-gallon water truck which will enable DOA to work with farmers whose farms cannot accommodate the 8000-gallon water trucks, "and the rest will go into working with the irrigation system, some in St. Thomas and some in the community gardens here," Robles said.

And if a declaration of disaster due to drought is made by the federal government, "what comes to the territory is essentially low interest loans, that's what we know in advance," Robles revealed. The commissioner then went down the line listing some of the work DOA has done since June, including distributing hay to various farms, including 1,200 bags of drought feed, 600 gallons of molasses among other items.

Yet farmers, business owners and concerned citizens were not satisfied with the commissioner's comments. They contended that the GVI was not moving fast enough, (a notion Robles disagreed with) and said livestock were dying daily.

The Agriculture Industry in the Virgin Islands has its biggest market here, and as a result, the drought that's been affecting the territory — and to a wider extent the Caribbean — has left many of the island's farmers in utter devastation, some losing most their herd as rain continues to evade the territory.

Dale Brown, co-founder of Sejah Farm, spoke with *The Consortium* last Sunday about the wreckage the drought has wreaked. While Brown hasn't lost any of his animals because of strategic planning, he said the farmers to the south of his farm, located on Casper Holstein Drive, have been hit so hard that it will take time for them to recover.

"One of the farmers down the road spends about \$200 to \$300 a month for feed that his bringing in from Puerto Rico, and that was before the drought got this bad," Brown said.

Images of dead livestock on various farms on the island have been made available to *The Consortium*, as advocates of drought relief work to expose the urgent nature of the situation. One farm, according to advocates, lost four cows in one week.

But help has been coming through various avenues as farmers have sought and received aid from the community to keep the flailing agriculture industry alive.

Sejah Farm, for example, has created a drought relief webpage on its [website](#) through which individuals could donate, an effort Browne said was initiated to prevent his operation from seeing the same fate as the neighboring farms.

“We have pregnant and lactating ewes and does who require more nutrition to maintain them during their pregnancy and nursing their lambs and kids. We have also halted all breeding of our livestock, because this will add more stress to the herd survival,” reads the post.

“At this point all that remain in the pastures are dry matter and rock that is not most adequate to maintain the herds’ nutrition. Neighboring farms has lost a significant amount of cattle, sheep and goats due to this drought, and now we are at a stage could reach this same fate.”