

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Territory Imports Over 97 Percent Of Its Food, Department Of Agriculture Reveals

Business / **Published On March 29, 2017 09:58 AM /**

Donna Bellot **March 29, 2017**



ST. CROIX -- The Centennial commemoration of Agrifest 2017 was hailed as a rousing success by Department of Agriculture (D.O.A.) Commissioner Denis Robles, during an address to the Legislature on Tuesday at the Frits E. Lawaetz Legislative Conference Room in Frederiksted. Mr. Robles also discussed the ongoing development of the agri-business industry in the territory, as well as the department's role in local Farm to School and Farm to Table initiatives.

Mr. Robles began with a brief review of the 46th Annual Agriculture and Food Fair of the Virgin Islands—Agrifest 2017—which he said received a tremendous show of support from roughly 30,000 Virgin Islanders and off-island guests -- almost matching last year's

31,000. After expressing his gratitude towards the members of the body for the success of Agrifest, he turned his attention to other issues.

“In light of the fact that the Virgin Islands continues to import more than 97% percent of its food from around the world, it has been one of the goals of this administration to find ways to rebuild the agriculture industry in the territory and to create marketing linkages between the growers, buyers and consumers of agri-business products,” Mr. Robles said.

He continued to say that given the advent of the fiscal constraints of the Virgin Islands government, it was necessary for him and his team to find innovative and creative ways to ensure that taxpayers' dollars were stretched as far as possible. He added that to accomplish D.O.A. would seek outside funding opportunities, including the federal government.

Despite being designated as a High Risk Recipient by the USDA in March of 2013, he says D.O.A. was able to receive \$207,000 in grant funding in 2015. Those funds were used to enhance the competitiveness of locally grown produce, and were directed to three major products. The high-risk designation was removed in 2016, paving the way for D.O.A. to reapply for the Specialty Crop Block funding for 2016 and future years. Mr. Robles says that \$210,000 of Specialty Crop Block Grant funds was used to fund the development of Growers Collaboration and the Harvest of the Month programs.

Mr. Robles said D.O.A. has been creating different partnerships to ensure that local farmers are earning while simultaneously promoting healthy eating. He said part of this effort included restoring the WIC FNMP. Other efforts included but were not limited to the restoration of the Abattoir's on both St. Thomas and St. Croix; expansions of the irrigation infrastructure in the Community Garden on St. Croix; an alternate water distribution system in Estate Dorothea; and funding from the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service in support of the Farmland Infrastructure Improvement program.

Critical staff shortages, and issues with leasing government farm land were cited as major challenges faced by D.O.A. when attempting to achieve their goals. According to Mr. Robles, a 2013 report by the Inspector General indicated that a lease was required in order for the the department to issue government farm land. He said D.O.A. is anticipating the lifting of the government hiring freeze to be able to boost staffing to meet the increasing demand for services.

In conclusion, Mr. Robles said, “The agriculture industry in the Virgin Islands is being positioned to make a recognizable and appreciable contribution to the economic landscape of the Virgin Islands.” He called for the continued support of the Mapp administration and the people of the Virgin Islands, to assist D.O.A. in faithfully doing its part to ensure that the people of the VI have access to more locally-grown food on a regular and consistent basis.