

The Virgin Islands Consortium

St. Croix Abattoir, Suspended Twice By Federal Agency For Inhumane Slaughtering Of Bovine, Working On Rectifying Problem

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ST. CROIX -- The St. Croix Abattoir, which was suspended twice by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (U.S.D.A.) Food Safety Inspection Service (F.S.I.S.) for a violation of the federal humane handling regulations during the slaughtering of bovine (bulls and cows) months ago, may soon be allowed to once again process bovine, according to Department of Agriculture Commissioner Carlos Robles.

Mr. Robles at the top of his testimony during a budget hearing on Tuesday, spoke of the two incidents that caused the suspensions, and said that D.O.A. had taken measures to

ensure repeats do not occur.

"Without going into too many details, federal law requires that no more than two attempts should be made at stunning an animal as part of the processing procedure. Unfortunately, because of a combination of factors to include the age and density of the animal's cranium (head), the type of bolt used and/or possible human error, the animal did not "go down" as anticipated. This resulted in the immediate closure of the abattoir and unfortunately stranded several other nonbovine animals (sheep, goat, pigs) that were held in the pen," Mr. Robles said.

The first F.S.I.S. suspension letter, issued on October 13, 2016, and seen [here](#), details the attempted stunning gone awry.

"Specifically, on October 13, 2016 at approximately 10:40 a.m. while verifying the humane slaughter of livestock, the Consumer Safety Inspector (C.S.I.) observed establishment personnel ineffectively stun a Senepol bull with a Hand Held Captive Bolt (H.H.C.B.). After the seventeenth shot had been fired with the H.H.C.B. the C.S.I. observed that the bull was shackled and partially hoisted but had rhythmic breathing and a corneal reflex. The CSI counted up to 24 shots being fired with the H.H.C.B. before the animal was rendered unconscious, fully hoisted and bled. A regulatory control action was taken by tagging the stun box with U.S. Reject tag number 819323312. This is an egregious humane handling noncompliance," reads a portion of the suspension letter.

On Tuesday, Mr. Robles said D.O.A., which is seeking \$4.08 million for its 2018 budget as recommended by Governor Kenneth Mapp, reviewed its procedures for handling and processing following the incident, and revised and submitted it to F.S.I.S.'s regional office in Atlanta for approval. "Once the approval of the new procedures was granted, the plant was reopened for slaughtering within two weeks. One of the new procedures included the processing of non-bovine animals before bovines in an effort to eliminate the inconvenience to other farmers whose businesses would be adversely impacted," Mr. Robles said.

But another incident that Mr. Robles described as "unfortunate", which occurred in March, triggered another suspension (notice seen [here](#)) from F.S.I.S., again for violating federal humane handling regulations. Since then, Mr. Robles said, the abattoir has been suspended from processing bovine, although it's allowed to slaughter swine, goat and sheep.

Mr. Robles said former director of the St. Croix Abattoir, Cardinal Richardson, along with Deputy D.O.A. Commissioner Arthur C. Petersen, and others, have been working with F.S.I.S.'s regional office to resolve the matter. He said several suggestions, including structural alterations and equipment, were rejected. But a breakthrough came when, through a recommendation by F.S.I.S., a D.O.A. team visited a private abattoir in Puerto Rico to observe the use of an F.S.I.S.-sanctioned cattle restraint. Mr. Robles said D.O.A. was able to buy the item used by the privately held abattoir in P.R., using a senior administrator's credit card instead of waiting for the government's procurement process. This was done because of the urgency of the matter, Mr. Roble said.

"I am happy to report and to announce to our cattle farmers that the cattle head restraint has arrived on St. Croix as of yesterday, and will be installed as soon as possible. We

are simultaneously working with a local engineer to gather additional quotations for the scope of work," Mr. Robles said.

He later added, "Finally, I want to apologize to the cattle men and women whose livelihood has been affected by this unfortunate situation. We appreciate your criticisms, your visits to the office, your suggestions, but most of all your patience. Because of the seriousness of the matter and to clarify what is really happening at the St. Croix Abattoir, I just felt that it was important to address this matter early on and to lay all misinformation to rest."

Also at Tuesday's budget hearing, the Public Broadcasting System's budget, as per the governor's recommendation, was revealed to be \$4.4 million, a figure that represents a decrease of \$36,061. The Office of the Public Defender presented its budget as well. It sought \$4,560,000, which is \$332,880 more than the governor's recommendation of 4,227,120.