

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Scaled Back But Still Successful: First Day Of Agrifest 2018 Sees Hundreds Of Residents

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ST. CROIX -- Usually, a St. Croix Agricultural Fair story leads with something like this: "Thousands Turnout to Agrifest" or something along those lines. The event is the largest of its kind in the U.S. Virgin Islands, and attracts visitors from the St. Thomas-St. John District, Tortola, and even other Caribbean islands.

But this year's Agricultural Fair was not on the scale of past events for multiple reasons: The Shulterbrandt Agricultural Complex in Estate Lower Love was all but destroyed by Hurricane Maria, forcing the Agriculture and Food Fair Board of Directors to postpone the event and curtail some activities. And with the fair being held in May this year, the annual planning of those who travel to attend was upended, compounding the smaller turnout

this year.

Then there's the factor of migration. Thousands of Virgin Islanders left the territory for the mainland following the deadly and destructive storms of 2017, and have started to plant themselves in various states across the U.S.

Even so, St. Croix residents came out by the hundreds to participate in what has become one of the most anticipated events on St. Croix throughout the years. Residents and visitors alike were entertained, as has been the custom, by multiple groups. People walked back and forth across the grounds, tasting foods, buying products and mingling. This year was particularly ripe with politicians vying for office in the upcoming 2018 primary and general elections.

This year's event was named after Sharon M. Brown by the board of directors, which she served on for many years. Ms. Brown is well known in the community for her staunch advocacy and exemplary life relative to the territory's culture.

Grantley Samuel and Linda Lacy Hodge were named Farmers of the Year for crops and livestock respectively.

Local dignitaries, among them Governor Kenneth Mapp, Delegate to Congress Stacey Plaskett and Myron Jackson, president of the 32nd Legislature, were present for the opening ceremony. Leaders praised the Department of Agriculture and the Agriculture and Food Fair Board of Directors for bringing the fair to life under such difficult circumstances and with limited resources.

Mr. Mapp said agriculture remains an important part of the territory's economy. "Irma and Maria did hit our territory a significant blow, but we have really, really good friends and partners, and the Virgin Islands is enjoying its entire 101 year history one of its closest relationships with its national government the U.S. government," Mr. Mapp said. He said more had to be done to not only get farmers loans, but grants as well "to really get their farms back together."

Organizers will have less time to prepare for next year's fair, which is slated to go back to its traditional dates in February 2019. But even then, the event's historical scale may not be realized, as there remains much work to do not only on the fair grounds -- which Department of Agriculture Commissioner Carlos Robles said had sustained roughly \$15 million in damages -- but also strengthening the territory's economy and attracting back home those who left because of the storms.

For many residents, though, simply hosting a well executed event will be enough motivation to keep coming back.