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St. Croix Abattoir Reopens With Ribbon-Cutting Ceremony; St. Thomas Facility to Undergo Structural Assessment

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Inside the St. Croix Abattoir By. DEPT. OF AGRICULTURE

ST. CROIX — Suspended [since February 14](#), the St. Croix abattoir reopens for business Monday, allowing livestock owners and private residents to slaughter their animals at the facility for either commercial or personal use.

The reopening was marked by a ribbon-cutting ceremony on Friday at the Dept. of Agriculture (D.O.A.) grounds in Estate Lower Love. A number of dignitaries were present for the milestone, among them Governor Albert Bryan and Senator Allison DeGazon, the latter who chairs the Committee on Economic Development, Regulations and Agriculture.

D.O.A. Commissioner Positive Nelson said when announcing the suspension in February, both the St. Thomas and St. Croix abattoirs had received 17 non-regulatory citations from the U.S. Department of Agriculture, and that the local agriculture department had been working to address the challenges, which he said was a very difficult process while maintaining operations.

Fast forward to March when Covid-19 struck and the reopening effort became even more difficult.

"There's been quite a number of challenges, sleepless nights, even moments of tears because when we took the voluntary closure, nobody foresaw Covid happening and that created some challenges especially as it relates to importing parts and supplies. So I'm grateful," Mr. Nelson said.

The commissioner said getting the abattoir back online was prolonged by other unforeseen issues as well, including the cleaning of an aqueduct at the facility that unearthed "inches of mold, blood particles, and rust."

"That changes the game," he said. Mr. Nelson commended employees for their work and mentioned tradesmen who were contracted to help with the process. "We're going to do more and we plan to do more, but there's a lot of things that's been in a state of disrepair for quite sometime. And with this, when you fix one thing, [it] causes more pressure to go to something else, [leading] to setbacks.

"But we toiled and we're here to this point," he said.

Ms. DeGazon, praised by both Mr. Bryan and Mr. Nelson, lauded the reopening as one of many positive things happening in agriculture in the territory. "This is a great step in the right direction. We are poised, we are ready for leaps and bounds of growth," she said.

Assistant Commissioner Diana Collingwood, who was charged with leading the effort of getting the abattoir operational again, was highlighted by Mr. Nelson as someone indelible to the process of reopening, and he praised her as indispensable.

"We recognize that agriculture is not a joke and we are committed to excellence in agriculture," Ms. Collingwood said of D.O.A.

She described the process of getting the abattoir back online as the pains of having a baby and the joy that comes after birth. "And you forget all of that," she said, referring to the pains of conceiving a child and, in the Dept. of Agriculture's case, the challenges of getting the abattoir back to standard.

"I have to say the strength of all this for us as an administration is the bond and relationship that we developed with the abattoir staff. Understanding their culture; really understanding their needs and meeting those needs," she said.

Ms. Collingwood took the audience through the St. Croix's abattoir's process through slides projected on a screen. She also gave the abattoir's identifying number as 482. "Whenever you see that number stamped on a piece of carcass, that's from the St. Croix abattoir," she said.

A number of employees were recognized at the event, with Mr. Nelson presenting them with certification documents. The commissioner said it was the first time that the department had so many certified abattoir employees in their respective fields.

"We've heard about agriculture over the years and many of us believe we don't get the attention that is needed," Mr. Nelson said. To that end, he thanked Mr. Bryan for what he said was the administration's focus, initiative and "interest in us trying to lift agriculture to the level."

For Mr. Bryan, the reopening of the slaughterhouse was an important milestone that needed to be officially recognized. The governor said he had heard that the abattoir on St. Croix was reopening, and he reached out to Mr. Nelson asking whether there would be a ribbon-cutting for the accomplishment. Mr. Nelson said no, but Mr. Bryan insisted, stating during the event, "It is important that we acknowledge our steps forward."

The St. Thomas abattoir still remains closed and there is no timeline for reopening, Mr. Nelson said. He told the Consortium that the facility was scheduled to reopen between July-August, but that's no longer possible, as a recent occurrence at the facility has forced a structural integrity assessment of the building. "That building may not be any good at all," he said.

To accomodate St. Thomas in the interim, Mr. Nelson said the Dept. of Agriculture would be accepting livestock from the sister island and would incur the cost of shipping the slaughtered carcasses back to St. Thomas.