

The Virgin Islands Consortium

At Agriculture Meeting, Nelson Blasts Former Commissioner For Failures, Talks Plans To Revitalize Industry

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ST. CROIX -- Tuesday evening at the University of the Virgin Islands' Great Hall the Department of Agriculture held a comprehensive meeting to assist farmers and agriculture stakeholders. D.O.A. Commissioner Designee Positive T.A. Nelson, said the department has undergone serious restructuring to help implement what the department feels are much needed changes to ensure food sources from within the territory begin to thrive once again.

Mr. Nelson's belief is that although food cultivation as a topic is not new to St. Croix and the Virgin Islands, its importance has been lost. He said historic records show that the island of St. Croix had specific areas for certain crops that, in proper and steady farming practices, made the territory's former owner, Denmark, rich. He added that there have been deliberate attempts to undermine farming in the territory as many locals themselves shun agriculture and farming as being a poor man's work.

"I think it's a phobia where the older population sees farming as slavery... it's [seen] only as a last resort when, in fact, it's our best chance of a viable food supply and we must show the importance of it to the younger generation," he said. Moreover, Mr. Nelson said, "Food sources that are shipped in are not healthy as there are too many dangers associated with it that are out of our control." According to the former senator, agriculture in the territory went through an attempted murder, contending that the oil refinery took precedence over ensuring that inhabitants could be self-reliant in creating and sustaining a good food supply.



The purpose of the meeting was to convey the department's commitment to increasing productivity, capacity, safety, and support for all farmers. Diana Collingwood, assistant commissioner at D.O.A., said, "We know that there have been challenges, but we have to move into the future. We need to get back to strong communication and best practices and develop a pipeline that supports each other." Ms. Collingwood alluded to what many local farmers see as inconsistencies in how things had been handled in the past. Mr. Nelson was more straightforward, speaking at length of what he deemed the failures of the former D.O.A. commissioner.

Ms. Collingwood thanked the long-standing support given by partners such as the University of the Virgin Islands Cooperative Extension Services, the Department of Property and Procurement, the Economic Development Authority and the VI Agriculture Advisory Group. Other D.O.A. officials gave updates on best practices and financial support available to farmers.

Robelto James, D.O.A. property manager who works with land leased to farmers through the department, went through updates in regulations for farmers to keep their leased property and to ensure that farmers understood that if proper permits were not renewed or obtained, the department would take steps to separate them from the property leased. In addition, Mr. James said the department would be conducting audits of the properties to make sure farmers were working in accordance with the department's requirements. For Mr. James, seeing production levels increase means the department will have to ensure that its efforts are not being wasted on individuals who do not want to improve their farms. In the end, Mr. James urged the audience to treat agriculture like a real business, at which point he said they would see the benefits and profits.



EDA representatives, including First Lady Yolanda Bryan, center right

Senator Allison DeGazon, who chairs the Senate Committee on Economic Development and Agriculture, was in attendance and spoke from a personal standpoint as a farmer who suffers from the same problems as her counterparts. She urged all farmers to work hard and revealed that she was crafting legislation that would support farmers and help grow the agriculture industry in the territory.

Dr. Bethany Bradford, director of Veterinary Services spoke on stocking rates, watering, drought concerns, animal health, tagging and dealing with stray animals.

Dr. Bradford gave the science behind how much livestock should be kept on a piece of land depending on the type of livestock. "Stocking rates should be set specifically and not arbitrarily," she said, adding that livestock farmers were essentially grass farmers, as they must keep enough food for their animals. She also focused on helping the audience understand the importance of proper fencing and planning for a drought season.

Stafford Crossman, acting state director for the UVI Cooperative Extension Service (CES) oversees all of the activities related to training, technical assistance, and informal education for farmers. Mr. Crossman, who has worked with both the department and UVI for over 30 years, said the partnership between the two is one of the longest memorandums of understanding the government and UVI has had. He was pleased to see the large turn out Tuesday, but appeared to suggest that farmers were still being affected by unfulfilled promises. Mr. Crossman encouraged all farmers to be patient with the new administration and urged them to complete the census of agriculture, which supports how the United States Department of Agriculture allocates money for states and territories.

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The Urban and Community Forestry Program, which provides grants, has made grants available to farmers in the territory for the past for years. The program's director, Louis Hilgemann, said Tuesday's turnout was good and expressed that more people should take advantage of the grants provided through his office.

Another lender at the meeting was the Economic Development Authority, which helps with low interest, small business loans and with technical assistance in completing all forms needed for processing. This program provides a secondary loan and individuals must first seek traditional bank loans and be denied before applying through the EDA. The program has special loans for farmers and fishermen, but similar grants following Hurricanes Irma and Maria overshadowed the program, which is now seeing some traffic as many people need help with procuring equipment to increase productivity and capacity.

First Lady Yolanda Bryan, in her second day on the job as the EDA's business ambassador, spoke about her new role and expressed excitement to be part of such forums, whose aim is to benefit Virgin Islanders.