

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Bill to Establish Territorial Agriculture Plan Passes First Test

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Farmer walks while carrying a crate full of fresh produce at his farm. By. iStock/VICONSORTIUM

A bill requiring the Department of Agriculture (D.O.A.) to develop a territorial agriculture plan while providing an appropriation of \$180,000 from the government's general fund to facilitate the action, sailed through the Committee on Economic Development, Regulations and Agriculture Monday.

Bill No. 33-0376 was sponsored by Senator Donna Frett-Gregory. Lawmakers heard testimonies of support from UVI President Dr. David and D.O.A. Commissioner Positive

T.A. Nelson.

"This bill and its underlying initiative is long overdue, and the university applauds those who have requested that a territorial agriculture plan be developed," said Dr. Hall.

Ms. Frett-Gregory told the committee that the intent of the bill is to develop a business model that will create a profitable and sustainable community-based agriculture program for Virgin Islands farmers. "We have lots of conversations around agriculture, but the conversations we've had aren't necessarily structured... and I believe it's time we implement a structured program around agriculture," she said.

Dr. Hall agreed with Ms. Frett-Gregory's sentiments, telling legislators that an agriculture plan must be comprehensive and centered around a mixture of new and old ideas. He said the ideas proposed should guarantee continuous local food production, distribution and should significantly reduce food importation into the territory.

Currently, the USVI is 97 percent dependent on imported food, spending roughly \$700 million each year, said Mr. Nelson. Having a structured agriculture plan can create new employment opportunities and be linked to the tourism industry, which is an essential source of revenue for the territory, he said.

Mr. Nelson outlined in his testimony that in order to accommodate a local food system in the territory, there must be infrastructures such as value-added processing and packaging facilities, secured and refrigerated storage, etc. "Agriculture in the Virgin Islands has proven its worth for decades," said Mr. Nelson. "Through the proper organization, funding, regulation, and policies, we can once again experience a booming agriculture economy."

The bill was favorably voted on and will be sent to the Committee on Rules and Judiciary for further consideration.

The following measures were held in committee pending further amendments:

- Bill No. 33-0350 – An Act amending Title 27 Virgin Islands Code, chapter 15 relating to real estate brokers and salespersons to update the requirement for real estate broker and sales associate licensure, proposed by Senator Allison DeGazon.
- Bill No. 33-0349 – An Act amending Title 3 Virgin Islands Code, chapter 19, by adding a section 341, establishing the Tourism Enhancement Revolving Fund, using the monies in the Fund for the enhancement of the Virgin Islands tourism product, thereby contributing to sustainable tourism development proposed by Senator Stedmann Hodge Jr.