

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Senators Forward Bill To Create Plan To Preserve Seeds For Farmers in Time of Need

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Kyle Murphy **September 09, 2021**



Bill No 34-0047, an act sponsored by Senator Samuel Carrion, that would require the University of the Virgin Islands and department of agriculture to create a plan to develop a seed banking program to store and preserve seeds for preservation against climate change, natural disasters and other situations that could lead to total annihilation of crops, plants and other fauna and flora, was forwarded by the Committee on Agriculture and Economic Development to the Rules and Judiciary Committee on Wednesday.

During Mr. Carrion's bill introduction, he summarized the problem that the bill addresses "Everytime the territory faces a natural disaster there is significant risk that the overall ecosystem of the territory is changed, altered or sometimes lost. This disrupts plants and wildlife crucial to our territory's ecosystem."

He then added "this legislation is one of many pieces that would help address the matter of food security to ensure that not only that everyday residents are able to not only to receive food in time of natural disaster but our farmers are able to continue producing and our territory's ecosystem may continue to thrive."

The senator said that this bill "will be beneficial to the territory short and long term" because it "will set the foundation for the department of agriculture and the University of the Virgin Islands agriculture experimental service division to create a substantial plan to develop a seed banking program which will allow the storage and preservation of seeds against natural disasters and climate change... or other situation that will lead to a partial a complete annihilation of crops and other plants."

Mr. Carrion said "Seeds banks are also credited for protecting and keeping cultural and tradition alive as they conserve local varieties and restore rare varieties that have disappeared from the community, provide access to good quality seeds that make them readily available at a low cost to farmers and community members that are interested in and in need of such seeds" and hoped that "the seed-banking act will set the foundation for the conservation of seeds that are indigenous to the territory allowing for an emergency back up of seeds to ensure the sustainability of the territory's ecology and our whole ecosystem."

Other benefits of the initiative that the senator included that he spoke about were that it would help with research, educational opportunities, create new jobs, support and promote the agriculture industry, collection of data, and engage various sectors of the community in a collaborative manner.

Mr. Carrion explained the bill's intent "is to conserve local varieties and rare varieties before their genetic diversity is lost due to natural disasters or man made disasters" when he introduced the bill.

According to the bill, the planning phase of the seed banking program must be completed and submitted to the appropriate committee of the Legislature not later than one year after the date of enactment of this act if signed into law.

The bill also says the plan at minimum would need to include the type of seeds to be preserved and stored, identification of the entity that will decide the types of seeds to be preserved, the number of banks intended, an explanation of the criteria to be used for determining the location of a seed bank, identification of persons or entities that will collect and deposit the seeds , an explanation of how the seed bank will be operated, including who will operate the seed banks, who will have ownerships of the seeds, what entities will have access to the seeds during the preservation and storage and how the seeds will be distributed, the financial needs for the implementation of a seed banking program in the Virgin Islands and the identification of federal funds that are available for this program, if any.

In his closing, Mr. Carrion said “the intention of this bill is to create the plan, it’s not establishing the seed bank but it’s bringing the agencies together and all the stakeholders together so we can establish a plan in the creation of the seed bank...this is the stage of where we are, its to be able to create the plan which will be done in collaboration with department of agriculture and the University of the Virgin Islands and with other stakeholders to ensure the security of food security within our territory.”

Senator Javan James wanted to know what the initial steps would be a year from now should the bill be enacted and the plan created. Diana Collingwood, department of agriculture assistant commissioner, explained that the staffing would be one of the most needed initial steps. “For any incentive to work we have to have adequate staff to oversee...administer the plan, a plan in itself will not be adequate.” Other steps that she spoke about would be to identify a building, establish programs within the schools of the Virgin Islands and work with the university to research in collaboration with other Caribbean islands.

Sens. Kenneth Gittens, Donna Frett-Gregory, Javan James, Dwayne DeGraff, and Novelle Francis Jr., voted in favor of the bill which advanced it to the Committee on Rules and Judiciary