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USVI Delegation Sees Opportunities and Complexities After Tour of Marijuana Grow Facility in Colorado

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Governor Albert Bryan, center left, listens to Telluride head of operations Rick Scicchitano, left, during a tour of the marijuana grow facility on Wed., Oct. 27, 2021. By. ERNICE GILBERT/ VI CONSORTIUM

DENVER, COLORADO — The delegation of U.S. Virgin Islands leaders currently in Denver, Colorado as part of a mission to better understand the cannabis industry ahead of major debate and possible approval of legislation by year's end, left a grow facility 2 hours outside Denver on Wednesday feeling optimistic about the potential of a thriving industry in the USVI, as well as getting a first-hand understanding of the challenges of managing a successful grow operation.

The weeklong summit was organized by Senate President Donna Frett-Gregory and by all indications has proven to be not only well executed, but also critically needed as local leaders prepare the USVI to take on the complex yet rewarding task that will need the participation of all involved. From the legislative and executive branches of government on shaping the final bill, to the regulatory arms such as the V.I. Dept. of Licensing and Consumer Affairs, the Office of Cannabis Regulation, and the Virgin Islands Cannabis Advisory Board on ascertaining product quality and monitoring, among other important functions.

The tour of Telluride Bud Company, a small marijuana grow facility, was led by head of operations Rick Scicchitano. It included a look at the process of cultivating marijuana from start to finish, and the nurturing that is needed until harvest. From the right temperatures, lighting, cloning, watering, pruning and drying — the process appears to be a delicate balance to ascertain top quality. To emphasize the importance of monitoring, Mr. Scicchitano showed the delegation marijuana plants that had developed mildew because "the crew that was in charge of this row didn't do a thorough enough job of spraying these plants with our regimen to keep this in check."

Regarding monitoring for quality compliance and making sure that the company does not sell its products on the black market, the Marijuana Enforcement Division of Colorado has year-round access to Telluride's systems through a software called [Metric](#). Tammie Goodall, Telluride compliance director described the software as the best system that facilitates a surfeit of functions, including the critical component of allowing the government's enforcement arm to monitor grows.

Governor Albert Bryan and Ms. Frett-Gregory discussed during the tour potential challenges facing the USVI for such operations, most pointedly the cost of energy. Mr. Scicchitano said energy costs at Telluride could be anywhere between \$4,000-\$5,000 monthly, a cost equivalent in the USVI of around \$15,000. Colorado's kilowatt per hour is 13.44 cents, while the USVI currently stands at 40.03 and 42.65 cents after the first 250 kilowatt hour usage. Ms. Frett-Gregory spoke of utilizing renewable energy as way to mitigate WAPA costs.

Yet even with paying \$15,000 monthly for electricity to run a similar facility in the USVI, an operation the size of Telluride — which has about 5.2 harvests a year, with each harvest fetching roughly \$694,200 from an estimated 534 pounds of marijuana at \$1,300 a pound — would still see healthy margins with annual sales of \$3.6 million. Telluride aims to get 3/4 of a pound from each of 712 plants it cultivates per harvest, equating to 534 pounds of marijuana at an estimated \$1,300.

Speaking late Wednesday, Governor Bryan told the Consortium that his greatest takeaway from the summit has been complexity and opportunity. "I think the greatest takeaway from today is complexity and opportunity. I often think about these things on how brave we are about taking on new risks and new ventures. Every great journey begins with a first step, and today in Colorado, I saw the future in how we as Virgin Islanders can really capitalize on this for our people," Mr. Bryan said.

Immediately following the Telluride tour, Ms. Frett-Gregory expounded on the importance of the summit. "It demonstrates the importance of us understanding what it takes if we are going to move forward with this legislation," she said. She went on to talk about some of the information gathered on the tour, including government monitoring and the importance of quality control. "The system that has to be put in place by the individuals who are interested in this particular market will have to be seriously regulated," she added. "Us coming out here was a very important venture."

Senator Janelle Sarauw, who holds authorship on the bill for the legalization of marijuana for recreational use, said the summit was important, and that it highlighted how woefully behind the territory currently is in putting certain levers in place critical to a successful industry. She also said another event would be needed where stakeholders such as potential growers could get a firsthand understanding of the intricacies of the industry.

"The bill will come before the end of the year," she said. "But it was important for everybody to be on the same page and not continually spew a false narrative that it's an easy industry. It's very scientific."

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