

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Agrifest Picks Up From 2020 and Doesn't Miss a Beat at 50th Anniversary Event

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The Agriculture and Food Fair of the U.S. Virgin Islands. By. REEMY-REEMZ PHOTOGRAPHY/VICONSORTIUM

The Agriculture and Food Fair returned over the weekend after skipping one year as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. But aside from a lighter than expected crowd, which could be attributed to an event-filled Memorial Day Weekend and poor marketing by fair organizers, the popular three-day food and agriculture festival — among the largest in the Caribbean — returned like it never left.

The food, the entertainment, the art, the amusement for children and all the activities that make up the fair's uniqueness were back at the Schulterbrandt Agriculture Complex on St. Croix where the annual event takes place from Saturday through Monday.

Beautiful faces, seemingly happy to be enjoying once more a foundational cultural experience on the Big Island, as St. Croix is called, walked from end to end as they supported vendors, greeted acquaintances and enjoyed a number of activities.

At the fair's opening ceremony Saturday morning, local leaders spoke about the importance of agriculture as part of the territory's future. "Food is not an option, and because food is not an option it is incumbent upon us who live on islands surrounded by water to as much as possible facilitate the growth of food," said Positive Nelson, a former senator who now serves as Dept. of Agriculture commissioner under the Bryan administration.

University of the Virgin Islands President Dr. David Hall said while UVI has long been a partner through its School of Agriculture in organizing the annual Agriculture and Food Fair, the relationship between D.O.A. and UVI has grown more integrated in the last year and a half as a result of Act 8404, sponsored by Senate President Donna Frett-Gregory, which [charged the university and D.O.A. to create an agriculture plan](#) for the U.S. Virgin Islands.

"After nine months of intensive study, exploration and feedback from the farming community, we submitted to the governor and the Senate president a comprehensive, dynamic and viable plan for agriculture sustainability in the Virgin Islands," Mr. Hall said. The plan was created by a task force made up of individuals from both institutions, Island Green Living and three farmers selected by the farming community, the UVI president said.

Delegate to Congress Stacey Plaskett, who has been on the House Agriculture Committee since her first year in Congress in 2015, spoke about some of her efforts in Washington to enhance and strengthen agriculture in the territory. "In my role on the House Agriculture Committee, I have advocated tirelessly to ensure the Virgin Islands receives funding for the agriculture community," she said. The Bipartisan Budget Act of 2018 included supplemental appropriations for relief through the 2017 Wildfires and Hurricanes Indemnity Program (WHIP), including more than \$431,000 to U.S. Virgin Islands producers, Ms. Plaskett said.

The congresswoman also sought to highlight back-to-back challenges farmers have faced as a backdrop for advocating continuous support. "In recent years our agricultural community has faced severe hardships, including drought, floods, hurricanes, pressures as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, and supply chain disruptions. During these times of uncertainty, the hardworking producers of the Virgin Islands have employed creative means to handle our unique challenges and continue to support the community," she said. "The security and resiliency of our food system are paramount and continued investments in research in biotechnology will go a long way."

Ms. Frett-Gregory, president of the 34th Legislature and sponsor of the Act mandating an agricultural plan, said it is long overdue that agriculture be taken seriously in the territory.

Speaking of Agrifest, she said, "For three days our agricultural possibilities are highlighted and then quickly forgotten by many of us; let's just keep it real. But this time must be different. There must be a renewed commitment to support and expand agriculture in this Virgin Islands."

Governor Albert Bryan spoke of his administration's support for agriculture through funding and the backing of legislation — including a measure sponsored by Senator Novelle Francis that allocates 0.25 of the government's annual budget to agriculture, stated the governor. Among other efforts, the administration committed to purchasing over \$100,000 worth of produce from farmers during the height of the Covid-19 pandemic "because they didn't have anywhere to sell their goods with Covid going on," Mr. Bryan said.

This year's theme is "A Golden Opportunity to Grow in 2022." The Livestock Farmer of the Year recognition went to Alphonso James.

Agrifest, as the fair is known, is also taking place in May this year after organizers postponed the event from its February date because of a Covid surge that affected the territory at the time. We've uploaded over 200 pictures, watch them [here](#), and view our video [here](#).