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Sejah Farm Says Dept. of Agriculture Failing Farmers: No Water, No Abattoir, Lack of Essential Services; Commissioner Says 'Breakdowns are Inevitable'

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Butchered animals at an abattoir. The St. Croix facility has been down since one week before the annual fair which took place May 28-30 this year, and won't reopen until June 21, hampering farmers. By. GETTY IMAGES

Dale Browne, co-founder of Sejah Farm — the well-known 15-acre operation located in Estate Castle Burke just north of the V.I. National Guard Armory — has said that the V.I. Dept. of Agriculture has failed in its duty to be a facilitator in helping farmers succeed.

"Unfortunately the agency that is supposed to support, regulate and provide the service to farmers doesn't quite get it that they are responsible for that support system so that farmers could be

efficient, effective businesses," Mr. Browne told the Consortium Tuesday.

He said the department, located in Estate Lower Love has been closed this week and therefore essential services needed by farmers have been unavailable. The reason for the weeklong closure, according to D.O.A. Commissioner Positive Nelson, is "to allow for rest, retreat, and professional development. A well deserved break."

The abattoir, where animals are butchered to facilitate the sale of meat, has been closed since one week before the Agricultural and Food Fair and will remain unavailable through June 21, according to Mr. Browne, information that was corroborated by Mr. Nelson. The fair took place May 28, 29 and 30.

"If a livestock farmer depends on having animals prepared for anybody, they can't have it," Mr. Browne said.

Also unavailable to farmers from the Dept. of Agriculture was water, a critical commodity of any successful farming operation. Feed and seedlings have also been unavailable, according to Mr. Browne, as he expressed frustration with the current state of affairs and how badly it is affecting farmers.

"This is the lack of respect, the lack of living up to their responsibilities, they're being negligent. This is just ridiculous," Mr. Browne said.

He said there has been a reoccurrence of services being unavailable immediately before and after the annual fair activities, partly because the Agricultural and Food Fair Board utilizes the employees of D.O.A. to help prepare for the three-day event, and when the fair is over, the board leaves all the work up to department employees.

"I cannot put that strain on an employee if they're short-staffed, but then you have a different entity tied up in the department that actually causes the department to negate its responsibility, which is the Agriculture and Food Fair Board, and the board is off scot-free," Mr. Browne said.

Mr. Browne then took aim at Mr. Nelson, the D.O.A. commissioner, stating that "it is the executive's responsibility to make sure the department is in right order. The laws are clear that makes this an industry. The laws are clear that they should be promoting the industry. But you can't say you have an agricultural and food fair and you are part of that and after" and throughout the year you fail to meet your obligations to the farmers and the industry, Mr. Browne said.

In a statement to the Consortium responding to the Sejah Farm founder, Mr. Nelson said, "He's correct that the abattoir has been closed just before the Fair, [which was] due to a WAPA water disruption, then a water recertification requirement because of the disruption. Traditionally the department curtails services as most employees' concentration is on preparation for the Ag Fair."

He further stated that the department "is closed to the public this week to allow for rest, retreat, and professional development. A well deserved break."

Relative to the criticism from Mr. Browne that the department has failed in its core objective of providing services to farmers, Mr. Nelson stated, "I can't agree with anyone who says we are negligent. Breakdowns are inevitable."