

The Virgin Islands Consortium

V.I. Agriculture Industry Can Recapture Hundreds of Millions in Revenue, But Members of Advisory Council Must Be Competent, Farmers Say

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Elesha George **July 19, 2022**



It has been called “the blueprint to grow agriculture” and “the most comprehensive and publicly engaged plan for agriculture ever developed” in the U.S Virgin Islands by Dr. David Hall, president of the University of the Virgin Islands.

Mr. Hall is part of a task force that was formed to design that agricultural plan. But its members say for the plan to be successful, people who are knowledgeable on food production and its challenges must be the ones to seat on a proposed Agricultural Advisory Council.

Establishing the advisory council is the first tier to implementing the plan that Mr. Hall believes will create and maintain a sustainable local food system, able to supply the territory's school program and local markets.

For that to happen, Sommer Sibilly-Brown, the founder and executive director of Virgin Islands Good Food Coalition, made clear that what is needed is people who are familiar with the daily challenges that farmers in the territory face.

"It just can't be 10 government appointees or eight government appointees because we realize that they seat in those positions by virtue of their job title not by their passion, skill or expertise and that is subject to change every four years," she said Thursday during a hearing in the Committee on Economic Development and Agriculture.

Mr. Hall also believes that with the right people, the council can begin to improve the way food is provided, distributed and stored for future use. The expectation is that by growing more food locally residents will reduce on importing food. According to the United Nations' Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), residents in the Virgin Islands import 97 percent of the food consumed within the territory.

"That's the new structure and you need to have those people in place so that they can drive this with the food and farming coordinator working with them to make sure that we are changing the direction and the plans taking root," he explained.

A total of \$50 million dollars is also needed to fund supporting areas like grant writing and establishing various business models, the university president said, telling lawmakers that agriculture in the Virgin Islands is still in a developmental stage even though some individuals have been farming for decades.

"If we want a transformation in the way in which the business of agriculture progresses, then the support for the Agriculture Business Center is critical to help farmers at all levels to professionalize their operations and expand," he added.

Faced with extreme drought conditions and limited finances, farmers who seat on the task force have welcomed the plan.

"It has the potential to recapture hundreds of millions of dollars of economic revenue that is otherwise leaked out of the territory annually due to an addiction on food imports," said Nate Olive, owner of Ridge to Reef Farm and president of VI Farmers Alliance.

Luca Gasperi, owner of Artfarm LLC while giving support to the plan highlighted a number of areas that need to be addressed for improved food production to occur including the poor use of land space, education and water irrigation systems.

"My position is that this plan is the right action happening at the right time. Now, it is time to ensure it is executed with the right process," commented Sibilly-Brown.

She was joined by Dale Brown, owner at Sejah Farm of The Virgin Islands who said that the plan has come "56 years on the yearly demise of our territory's agriculture industry."

The plan will include short-term and long-term recommendations to create a curriculum from prekindergarten to college as well as the establishment of a water board to increase

water production for farmers in the Virgin Islands.

Mr. Brown said the water board must work with agencies like the Department of Natural Resource to ensure that construction work takes into account the effects on the environment and water and to reconstruct water ways in a way that is beneficial to agriculture.

"We are an island, land is limited and if we continue in the way that we are working, we are going to be worse off in the next few years," he said. "Our droughts are becoming longer and we are in a drought up to a year and a half up to today."

As required by Act 8404, the Agricultural Plan should contain policy and funding recommendations to support and expand the local food system, increase locally grown food production, and provide an avenue of food security in the territory. The law enables the Department of Agriculture and the president of the University of the Virgin Islands to collaborate to improve food security in the territory.