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Expert Staff and Mindset Change Needed to Transform Agriculture Sector in USVI, Department Says

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The V.I. Department of Agriculture says that growing technical expertise in local agriculture will be its main focus for fiscal year 2023, as it seeks to further support farmers in accessing grant assistance that will ultimately improve their ability to help build food security in the territory.

In 2023, the department estimates that federal grant funds from multi-year USDA Specialty Crop Grants, Forest Legacy Grants, Urban Forestry Grants, and other grantors will total \$1,064,080, resulting in the availability of \$7,950,384 in funds to assist local farmers.

But Agriculture Assistant Commissioner Diana Collingwood says currently the department does not employ enough specialized workers to reduce its dependency on outside assistance, which limits the number of farmers that can receive help with writing business plans and grant proposals.

“Every time we need expertise we have to reach out to Puerto Rico or the mainland, and we will never get the quality of support we need if we don’t grow our own experts in agriculture,” she told lawmakers this week.

A lack of human resource capacity is hindering the department’s ability to improve the area of food security.

Agriculture Commissioner Positive T.A. Nelson says poor staffing also restricts the amount of technical support they can offer to improve the work of individual farmers. The salaries of employees, he also noted, need to be increased to attract well qualified workers.

“The professionals that we talk about and the experts we talk about; but the salaries we offer cannot get those experts. They’re far removed from getting those experts needed,” he noted.

“When you talk about a soil specialist, or when you talk about an agronomist, you can’t offer them \$27,000 and expect to get no cream nor the crop. So, you’re going to get what you pay for.”

The Department of Agriculture has a total of 62 active employees, with 51 on St. Croix, nine on St. Thomas, and two on St. John.

In addition to building human capacity, the commissioner says that one other fundamental change that needs to happen in agriculture is a cultural change of how Virgin Islanders view the work of farmers. “When you send people to agriculture, you send people who are underperformers. You don’t send your high achievers to agriculture because the mindset of the general populace towards agriculture is the occupation of last resort.”

Ms. Collingwood believes that improvements can happen, but it will take additional time and support from all departments and agencies who depend on agriculture.

“It’s just really exposing the community and providing ag-literacy so that they can see the true value of investing and engaging in agriculture,” she says.

The Department of Agriculture has asked for a General Fund appropriation for the 2023 fiscal year of \$5,685,958, \$4,261,818 it plans to allocate to personnel and fringe benefits.