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Senators Are Unimpressed by Agriculture Commissioner's Efforts on Behalf of Department: More 'Aggressive' Posture Needed

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Elesha George **February 11, 2023**

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Positive Nelson, a former senator and current commissioner of the Dept. of Agriculture.
By. V.I. LEGISLATURE

Senators in the Committee on Economic Development and Agriculture seemed concerned about the ability of Department of Agriculture Commissioner Positive T.A. Nelson to effectively push the department towards improving the prospects for agricultural production in the territory.

Collectively, committee members were unimpressed by his efforts in trying to secure funding from, and create synergies with agencies that could bring the territory close to achieving food security and reducing its food import bill. They feel like he was not being aggressive enough, such

as when he testified about trying to get the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) to release about \$2 million that had been made available to the Department of Agriculture since last year.

At first, Mr. Nelson said that he'd been asking OMB Director Jenifer O'Neal about the funds. But when questioned further by Senate President Novelle Francis, the energy behind those inquiries was called into question.

"We had an initial conversation. It really wasn't in a business setting; it was just me talking to her at a ceremony," Mr. Nelson admitted.

"If there's an issue with getting the \$2 million from OMB, then you take it up to the [administration's] chief of staff, you take it up to the governor. If there's still an issue then bring it to this body then we'll do our part to move the needle on this," Mr. Francis advised.

For her part, Senator Alma Francis-Heyliger questioned the commitment of the Agriculture Commissioner to get results for the department he heads.

"When I hear the commissioner of Agriculture just tell me that he's just had a casual conversation to potentially access \$2 million that could potentially help his department to advance and help the farmers of this territory, but no real effort has gone into trying to get this money, it concerns me," she remarked. "I have often wondered when are we going to put agriculture at the forefront", the senator continued, saying that she was continually "disappointed" during hearings with the department because it does not seem like advancement in agriculture is occurring.

When asked about his vision for the department and how it would align with the Vision 2040 Plan for Agriculture, which [received a major boost this week](#) with funding being allocated to the Territorial Agriculture Plan, Mr. Nelson said he was not involved in developing the framework — a private firm had been contracted to do the work.

Management and staff in the Agriculture Department have met to understand their role in the plan, Mr. Nelson said, but could not be tasked according to their full responsibilities in that regard.

"Our team has met, trying to understand what is our role as a department in pushing this, what do we have to do as a department to ensure that we are ready to participate with the other entities. Right now, we have some internal things to do including trying to get some people on board," he said. A grants manager was needed, the commissioner said, as well as other additional staffers. Better pay packages needed to be implemented, and the government needed to review the budget period between September and November each year, during which Mr. Nelson says the department has no access to funding.

"A lot of the work is being done. What really needs to be connected is the flow of the inlet of young, fresh minds and that takes the Department of Agriculture, that takes the Department of Education, that takes the University of the Virgin Islands," he remarked.

Senator Donna Frett-Gregory was frustrated by what she said was Mr. Nelson's failure to answer direct questions. She was one who asked about his vision for the department, but in response Mr. Nelson instead highlighted what he considered to be the cause of problems in the government that trickles down to the department and other government agencies.

"I think we as a government need to understand where our challenges are," he said, adding that it's hard to move funds. "I can't write a check, I can't hire somebody, I can't procure a contract without going through other agencies. Until we fulfill and make sure that those agencies are more

fluid with their processes, every agency that talks about the money you send are going to have these very similar challenges,” Mr. Nelson explained.

“To be honest, as a government we really need to stop and take account if we want a more efficient government,” he continued, saying that the government needed to “take stock as a territory” of where they are in respect to the rest of the world.

Ms. Frett-Gregory retorted that Mr. Nelson was being evasive, only “saying whatever he wants to say” instead of providing direct answers to her questions. “I ain’t really getting nothing clear from you,” the senator noted. “Funding is not the only issue that prevents any entity from being successful. You’ve got to lay out your plan, let people know how serious you are about it and then you get what you need,” she said.

To this end, Senator Diane Capehart encouraged the commissioner to be more imaginative when it comes to solving problems within his department. “There are things that we can start doing creatively as a department even with what little resources that you have,” she said, pointing to the revitalization of a pond restoration program and youth programs, and researching ground water recharge to ensure that there is always potable water in the territory.

Mr. Nelson was meeting with the Committee on Economic Development and Agriculture on Wednesday to give an update on the overall status of the Department of Agriculture.