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Department of Agriculture Grapples with Abattoir Shortfalls Despite Strides Towards Recovery

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As the V.I. Department of Agriculture continues to stride towards recovery and advancement, the lack of adequate abattoir facilities has emerged as a critical roadblock. This issue was placed front and center on Friday when department representatives, led by Commissioner Nominee Dr. Louis Petersen, appeared before the 35th Legislature's Committee on Budget, Appropriations and Finance to justify a proposed 28% budget increase for fiscal year 2024, amounting to \$7.4 million.

Mr. Petersen acknowledged a series of accomplishments, such as the successful launch of the WIC Farmers Market Nutrition Program and the Backyard Farmers Development Project. "The WIC Farmers Nutrition Program is going very well. It is well received by farmers and the public, providing fresh produce to consumers and income to the farmers," he said. He further noted a 10% rise in the number of farmers serviced by veterinary services, and lauded the establishment of a

nature trail and a forestry curriculum program, showing the department's versatile progress.

However, the underfunded and deteriorating abattoir facilities on St. Thomas and St. Croix highlighted the significant challenges yet to be overcome. Senators expressed grave concerns about local farmers' access to these slaughtering facilities. Many livestock farmers have been forced to transport their animals for slaughter from St. Thomas to St. Croix, exacerbating logistical and financial issues. A poignant anecdote shared by Senator Franklin Johnson revealed some farmers resorting to burying their cows after slaughter due to difficulties in accessing the abattoir.

In response, Deputy Commissioner Risa Richards announced plans for a mobile unit to be installed on the St. Thomas abattoir site. The department has consulted with an engineering team and is collecting quotes for necessary survey work. Mr. Petersen added that the placement of the mobile unit would occur post-demolition, factoring in drainage and waterline issues. However, the estimated cost of the mobile unit ranges from \$500,000 - \$600,000, and the department is yet to secure the necessary funding.

The Department of Agriculture also grapples with tucking water to farmers in need and accommodating their employees amidst office space shortages. Michelle Elliott, the Administrator of Fiscal and Personnel Affairs, reported that a new water truck is in production while temporary water delivery is conducted with a secondhand fire service truck. Mr. Petersen acknowledged the space constraints challenge as the department seeks to hire more employees.

Closing his testimony, Mr. Petersen highlighted the department's seven-point agenda and emphasized the need for "new thinking and a new paradigm" in the industry. Acknowledging the resilience and dedication of the territory's farmers, he thanked the Legislature and the governor's administration for their continued support.

Even with the challenges, legislators expressed optimism about the department's prospects under Mr. Petersen's leadership, the key question remains - will the proposed 28% budget increase and additional funding sources secure the new era the department so eagerly seeks?

Meanwhile, Petersen acknowledged that the department needed more employees, but with space constraints already presenting a challenge, the acquisition of new staff was difficult. Senator Donna Frett-Gregory suggested using available government inventory for office spaces. She also raised a concern about the absence of salary increases. Petersen addressed this by mentioning plans to re-evaluate vacancies and potentially divert some of those funds to increase starting wages or salaries of existing employees.

The challenge of communication between the department and the territory's farmers was also articulated, with Mr. Petersen noting that better performance in this regard was one of the key needs expressed by the farming community. To this end, he told Senator Javan James Sr. that a new public information officer had recently been selected and was currently being onboarded.