



Thursday, February 8, 2023

Honorable Javan E. James
Chair of the Committee on Economic Development & Agriculture

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Good afternoon, Honorable Senator James and esteemed members of the 35th Legislature's Committee on Economic Development and Agriculture.

Good afternoon, to the farmers, fishers, producers and Virgin Islanders giving their time and attention to this conversation.

I am Sommer Sibilly-Brown, Founder and Executive Director of the Virgin Islands Good Food Coalition, Inc. We are honored to be here today for the purposes of providing testimony on the mission, vision, and work of the Virgin Islands Good Food Coalition, as well as speaking to the opportunities that lay before us regarding the Virgin Islands' Agricultural Plan.

Virgin Islands Good Food Coalition

Virgin Islands Good Food Coalition, often referred to as VI Good Food, is a nonprofit organization dedicated to strengthening and building a thriving, equitable, and just food system in the US Virgin Islands. We seek to advance a food system that prioritizes health equity, economic and environmental justice, and the principles of circular economics. Our work is centered on ensuring there are opportunities for stewarding the land and growing viable farm/food-based businesses, and that nutritious culturally-relevant food is accessible and affordable to all Virgin Islanders.

Established in 2012, VI Good Food is fiscally-sponsored under the St. Croix Foundation for Community Development and is incorporated by the Office of the Lieutenant Governor through the Division of Corporations and TradeMarks.

Like the Territory's Agriculture Plan, our work focuses on food security, sovereignty, sustainability, stewardship, and regeneration. In our formative years, our primary focus was on data collection. Post hurricanes Irma and Maria, we worked with the St. Croix Foundation, Federal Emergency Management Community Planning Division, and Iowa State University to complete a comprehensive food system assessment and a disaster preparedness checklist. **During that period, we learned the power of directly connecting with the food system actors who graciously shared their lived experiences and wisdom.** This informed our organization's understanding of the system's assets, barriers, and general dynamics. Throughout these interactions, we have harnessed data and completed several key snapshots and reports in the areas of Risk Management, Food System Resilience, Covid-19's impact on the food system, and gathered data on consumer values and behaviors.

We have touched over 300 actors in the system to include farmers, ranchers, restaurants, grocers, wholesalers, retailers, culture bearers, educators, youth and multi-sector institutions. Our community-centered approaches include, and are not limited to, farm-site visits, 1:1 interviews, focus groups, facilitating partners, and training sessions. We host, on average, three convenings per year. **Through these processes, we learned that our food system's resilience and growth potential are directly impacted by the quality of relationships and trust within and across the system.** A message that has been continuously reinforced by our diverse local agricultural community and partnerships across the Caribbean and U.S.

Examples of Our Programs' Current Projects

- Virgin Islands Virtual Farmers Market
 - creates a territory-wide online market that connects farmers directly to consumers and businesses. This increases equitable access to local food and online sales and markets. Mobile app will be customized for farmers' needs; beta version of online market will launch in late 2023.
- Food Find VI
 - includes mapping the geo-location and production/ facility data of all farms and food-related businesses in the USVI. Data collection will be completed in 2023, thus enabling integration with VITEMA and disaster and emergency planning. (Aligns with Mandate 8 DATA, BENCHMARK, AND ANALYSIS RECOMMENDATIONS)
- Resources for Resilient Farms
 - provides year-round, one-on-one technical assistance to farmers/producers in St. Thomas, St. John and St. Croix to assist with applying for multiple available federal funding resources, build conservation awareness and practices, and increase the efficacy and impact of federal agriculture grant funding in the VI. (Alignment Mandate 7 EDUCATION AND TRAINING RECOMMENDATIONS)
- Good Food Bucks
 - Is a consumers oriented nutrition incentive program that supports the purchase locally-grown healthy food and value-added products sold at local farmers markets, farm stands, Farm Tiendas, and community food

events, which helps support behavioral changes to promote health equity and combat the alarming rate of non-communicable diseases in the VI.

Virgin Islands Agriculture Plan & Path Forward

As stated in the July 14th, 2022 testimony to the 34th Legislature Committee on Economic Development and Agriculture, it is our position that the passage and now funding of the VI Agriculture Plan will now offer our territory's agriculture and food system the momentum needed to make significant gains towards the goal of food security.

As this body and key partners steward the vision of Act 8404, it is critical that we continue to ask the questions:

- What is the future of food for the territory that we are investing in now?
- Who are the actors best poised to enact that future?
- And, what are the conditions that we need to create for success?

We need to ensure that we are attending to labor needs, workforce development and supply chain issues as we build out and implement the plan. A condition for success is identifying stop-gap measures that offer immediate, low-overhead, direct support to the food system and farmers. Our food system and its actors have been impacted by Hurricanes Irma and Maria, Covid-19, Hovensa restart issues, drought, Tropical Storm Fiona, supply-chain disruptions, and inflation. Coupled with diminishing labor pools and systemic challenges to accessing relief and other resources, it is mission-critical to identify what can be done *now* to support the food system's farmers and consumers. The rising cost of eggs is just one example of the impact on each individual household. The reality of our system's fragility deepens when we consider that not only do we import 97% of our food, we also import 97% of the inputs to grow the food. We need rapid responses in parallel that are aligned with our longer-term efforts.

Another critical condition, which may also be the lowest hanging fruit, is the execution of Mandate 1: A comprehensive regulatory component for the territory's farming industry. I humbly ask this body to take decisive action on the review of the work done by the Agriculture Plan Taskforce on the repeal, amendment, and funding of existing laws to ensure that this work is built on fertile soil and that adequate structure, oversight, and funding be given to the executive branch to implement the laws so we can have maximum accountability.

In my previous testimony, I stated that one such condition to ensure the success of the establishment of a local Food and Farm Advisory Committee was skill, ability, and buy-in. These characteristics are found in a diverse, community-member body and not in a group of political appointees. Centering on key government institutions is critical but if it's our *only* strategy then it is short-sighted. The reality is that Food Systems should center people and support communities. Increasing capacity across all sectors, civic, public, and private is one way to have equitable distribution of resources and ensure that the concept of "ALL" is realized.

The final condition for success is community partnerships and cooperative work. This plan can not be achieved if it is structured to function in silos. There is an opportunity to work with grassroots organizations that have historically done this work through community and philanthropic efforts. These organizations currently serve to fill the gaps in services to farmers and have the trust of the community and producers. They benefit from decades of experience and deep connections to the people, environment, and nuanced contexts - and they are ready

for this time. Organizations like We Grow Food, Inc., Virgin Islands Farmers Alliance, Island Food Security, Farmers in Action and VI Good Food are working tirelessly to support the development of a healthy Food System. *Use us to your benefit.* These organizations are strong and have built solid relationships with local producers and national organizations. We have deep histories that support the work of our Farmers, such as SAAFON and the Federation of Southern Cooperatives, whose board president resides on St. Croix, as well as newly productive partnerships, such as with the Rural Advancement Foundation International (RAFI-USA) and those doing similar work in other territories.

Too often we seek to do good by creating answers that forward systems of oppression and exclude the very people we seek to serve. I am asking you to honor the work of those who have been holding the 2%, to think through the lens of those who came before us and those who will come after us.

We get to choose *how* we do this work. I am hoping we do it together. Together is the key for building trust and making meaningful progress.

In closing, there is an African proverb that says if you want to go fast go alone but if you want to go far go together. Virgin Islands Good Food's role as an NGO in the community, founded on community-centered practices, positions us to be a collaborative partner for the Territorial Agriculture Plan, and affords us the opportunity to bridge gaps and opportunities between farmers, consumers, government, private industry, and policymakers in order to facilitate equitable access to resources and long-term, systemic change; to strengthen the food system and our communities; and to enhance opportunities for small food-supply chains, increased market access, and sustainability.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak on behalf of the Territory's food system. I am eager to engage with you in the work ahead of us.