

## LAWMAKERS UPDATED ON THE STATUS OF THE AGRICULTURE INDUSTRY

**Date :** February 6, 2019

ST. THOMAS- Members of the Committee on Economic Development & Agriculture, chaired by Sen. Alison DeGazon, convened in a meeting at the Capitol Building on Wednesday, to receive testimony from the Virgin Islands Department of Agriculture (VIDOA) on the status of agricultural development in the Territory.

“Agriculture is a major economic sector in the Caribbean. It continues to generate income for other islands, facilitate food security, supply nutrition, and sovereignty, contribute to physical and infrastructural development and reduce poverty and hunger,” said Sen. DeGazon.

Currently, the status of agriculture in the Virgin Islands is “underutilized” noted Commissioner Nominee Positive Nelson. “Though, agriculture is proven potential has precedence it remains untapped and stagnant.” Some of the goals of VIDOA are to increase food production and security inclusive of crops, Next generation of farmers, livestock and marine life, boosting employee morale, market distribution, restore water preservation and dissemination, and the restoration of indigenous plants and forestry.

Nevertheless, the challenges plaguing the Department are unpredictable weather conditions such as a drought or natural disasters, low compensation for current farmers, the steady decline of the economy and the lack of people who are interested in pursuing a career in agriculture. Presently, the average age of a farmer is sixty-two years old. Sen. Athneil “Bobby” Thomas inquired of VIDOA’s strategy to attract younger farmers. Commissioner Nominee Nelson stated that educating youngsters and exposing them to new opportunities is a step in the right direction.

In 2017, there were 253 active licensed farmers in the St. Croix District. However, by 2018, there was a reduction of registered farmers on St. Croix totaling 171 of which approximately 40 farmers with a community garden had access to free water; the remaining must purchase water.

There are 27 registered farmers on St. Thomas and five on St. John. We Grow Food Inc. (WGF) President Eldridge Thomas noted that since December of 2018, water distribution has been a significant issue on St. Thomas. Despite hosting an Agricultural Fair, water trucks owned by the government were inoperable forcing WGF to buy water. Sen. DeGazon stated that infrastructure needs to be in place to give all farmers access to clean water.

VIDOA has an estimated 1,776.09 acres of the land asset on St. Croix of which 1,228 acres were leased. On St. Thomas, there is 133 acres of the land asset, but only 118 acres was distributed. On St. John, VIDOA has two acres of the land asset, and none of it was leased. Annually, the

collective profit from leased lands totals \$22,000. The percentage of farmers on Government property who has minimum farming activities equates to 34% of the farmers on St. Croix and 30% on St. Thomas. As it relates to outstanding land rental fee payments, there is 65% delinquent accounts on St. Thomas and 28% delinquent accounts on St. Croix. VIDOA is funded through Federal Grant Programs estimated at \$1.8 million, the General Fund estimated at \$4.5 and the Agriculture Revolving Fund of which \$37K generated in revenues for the first quarter of FY 2019.

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