

VIDA HAS MONETARY CHALLENGES FOR FY2020

Date : July 23, 2019

ST.CROIX--The

Committee on Finance chaired by Senator Kurt A. Vialet met on Tuesday morning in the UVI Great Hall, Albert Sheen Campus, St. Croix regarding the FY 2020 Fiscal Year Budget with the V.I. Department of Agriculture (VIDA).

Positive

T. Nelson, Commissioner of VIDA said in his testimony, the General Fund budget request is \$4,499,661 plus \$400,000 from the Miscellaneous section for a total appropriated budget of \$4,899,661.

According

to the Commissioner, they anticipate receipt of non-appropriated funds from the Veterinary (\$5,000); the Agriculture Revolving Fund (\$225,000); and the Tourism Advertising Fund (\$1 million).

The

total appropriated budget of \$4,899,661 consists of Personnel Services (\$2,555,426); Fringe Benefits (\$1,196,447); Supplies (\$84,457); Other Services and Charges (\$503,331); and Utilities (\$160,000).

He

added that, Federal grants such as Multi-year USDA Specialty Corps Grants, Forest Legacy Grants, Urban Forestry Grants, and other USDA grantors total \$553,971. This results in \$6,683,632 in funds available for FY 2020.

Committee

members were told that VIDA's biggest challenge on the island of St. Thomas has

been and continues to be water source, conservation, and distribution. The Commissioner said that they are in conversation with their federal partners to conduct ground water assessments in order to redirect their efforts toward a different approach.

He

added that this approach is the possibility of drilling a well where natural springs exist on hilltops' locations. The cost, he pointed out, of the previous plan to construct a 100,000-gallon cistern on St. Thomas more than doubled from \$350,000 to \$750,000.

On

St. Croix, said Commissioner Nelson is similar, but not as detrimental. Accordingly, retention ponds are filled with silt and water plants and are in urgent need of dredging. Furthermore, septic overflow has contaminated one of the major ponds and a major mitigation project to address water channeling freely to retention ponds and not to the ocean.

Commissioner

Nelson pointed out that critical farm equipment has been inoperable due to lack of funding for repairs, and the level of technical training of existing employees. Furthermore, the many budgetary and staffing challenges faced by VIDA during recent years has resulted in the reduction of critical staff positions, which were essentially faded out or remained unfilled.

An

important accomplishment by VIDA said the Commissioner, is collaborating with UVI and national partners to create a Master Gardner Program with the objective of establishing Urban Gardens throughout the Territory and supporting school gardening initiatives.

He

added that VIDA will facilitate environmental protection initiatives in support of building the territory's capacity to increase local food production and security.

d1 \l