Good Morning, Members of the Economic Development and Agriculture Committee

Senator Kenneth L. Gittens, Chairman
Senator Milton E. Potter, Vice Chairman
Senator Dwayne M. DeGraff
Senator Novelle E. Francis
Senator Donna A. Frett-Gregory
Senator Alma Francis Heyliger
Senator Javan E. James

Other Senators present.

Thanks for the opportunity to appear before you this morning to provide testimony on the status of the Territory’s Agriculture and Fishing Industries.

There is great potential for growth, expansion and development of the Agriculture Industry in the Virgin Islands, but the longer we delay, the more difficult it will become to achieve this.

The annual expenditure for some selected fresh/chilled/frozen agricultural products imported in 2019 was approximately $38 million. The products selected are those presently grown and/or raised locally.

The aggregate value of farm production according to the recent 2018 VI Census of Agriculture is $3,334,652. The Territory must strive to reduce imports by increasing the availability of local products and put that money into the bank accounts of our local producers.

The agriculture industry faces several constraints to agriculture production in the territory. They must be identified and strategies devised to overcome them.

There is a lot of competition for our limited freshwater resources. Agriculture is not a high priority to access this resource. Most of our rain falls during what is referred to as the “wet season” and runoff ends up in the sea. This water should be collected and stored, during the wet season, for agricultural purposes and to recharge our aquifers.

Constraints related to available land have some similarities to water.

- Land resources are limited
- The cost of land is high
- There is a lot of competition for available land
- The V.I. Dept. of Agriculture makes plots available to farmers but the acreage is limited.

The development of markets for local produce, both crops and livestock, must continue. Capacity must be increased to meet the anticipated surge in local production. Our farmers
need assistance in facing competition from lower-priced imported products. The marketing program at the VIDA is continually increasing its capability through a variety of programs to encourage, support and assist farmers in this area.

Act No. 6836 cited as the **Sustainable Farming Act** is a significant piece of legislation. The purpose of this act is to promote and protect the agriculture industry of the Virgin Islands. If what is stated in the Sustainable Farming Act is implemented, we will be well on our way to having a sustainable farming industry.

The Act is very broad in scope, involving many governmental agencies and instrumentalities including the University of the Virgin Islands, home of the Cooperative Extension Service.

The **UVI Cooperative Extension Service (CES)** is a component of the newly established UVI School of Agriculture (SOA), which is comprised of Research (the Agricultural Experiment Station), Extension and Teaching. Yes, UVI now has an academic agriculture program that will be offering certificates and degrees in various disciplines of agriculture. The Agricultural Experiment Station conducts research that is relevant to the agriculture industry in the Virgin Islands.

The Cooperative Extension Service translates science-based research results into language that is appropriate for our audiences.

We provide education and learning activities to farmers, youth, families and the public. Our programs are Agriculture and Natural Resources, 4-H/Family and Consumer Sciences, and Communications, Technology and Distance Learning.

We have a long history of working with the farming community in partnership with other Departments of the local government. Our primary partners are the Departments of Agriculture, Planning and Natural Resources, Education, Labor and Human Services. We also work with our USDA Partners – Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and Farm Service Agency (FSA) along with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA).

Being aware of the challenges and constraints facing the development of our agriculture industry we have focused on addressing them through our educational, training and outreach programs. Our staff responds to the technical needs of farmers by providing technical information, advice and assistance through telephone calls, office visits, farm/site visits, email, social media, online platforms, workshops, seminars, demonstrations, field days and major outreach activities.

A very successful program that the SOA CES undertook, a few years ago, was the Beginning Farmers Development Program conducted in partnership with the Agricultural Experiment Station and the VI Department of Agriculture. The goals of that training program included attracting new persons into farming and increasing the production of
crops and livestock. The new VI Census of Agriculture indicated an increase in both of these areas so we are pleased with the results, but the average age of farmers in the Virgin Islands is still high, at 61 years.

Through a Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (SARE) funded two-year project, the SOA CES has partnered with farmers cooperatives on the US mainland to provide mentorship to local farmers who desire to form cooperative business enterprises. We developed a training program, the ‘Cooperative Business Model’ to educate farmers about the value of organizing to address their operational and economic needs through a collective business enterprise.

We provide training on Food Safety to educate farmers about the provisions of the Food Safety Modernization Act. In the aftermath of the COVID-19 Pandemic, we responded to the needs of producers and shared information regarding safe practices for the sale of farm products.

We provide training on Recordkeeping and Farming as a Business

Our staff also partnered with USDA agencies (FSA and NRCS) to disseminate information to the farming clientele regarding COVID-19 Relief Funds. In addition to information dissemination, our staff directly assisted farmers with the application process, scanning of supporting documents, and transmittal of completed forms to the pertinent USDA agency.

Our staff provided technical support to a group of four female farmers (representing both districts) who were subsequently successful in receiving the first SARE Producer Grant award in the USVI. As a result of this effort, a prototype small-scale distillation unit for extracting essential oil from lemongrass was assembled. The project also demonstrated which of two types of lemongrass yields the greater quantity of oil. The project outcome has economic implications for farmers.

An inter-agency meeting was convened by former Senator Myron Jackson to address the issue of limited water resources for farmers in Estate Bordeaux on St. Thomas. The resulting inter-agency committee consists of representatives of We Grow Food, Inc., the Office of the Governor, WAPA, the VI Department of Agriculture (VIDA), and the UVI School of Agriculture Cooperative Extension Service (SOA CES). The committee is chaired by the SOA CES and VIDA. Contact has been made with the Department of Interior regarding possibilities for funding the project.

The SOA offers the AgDiscovery Summer Enrichment Program to educate students about academic and career opportunities in the field of agriculture.

Since the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been a tremendous increase in the number of residents involved in home gardening. We have responded to an exponential surge in requests for assistance.
Our Integrated Pest Management program responds to the pest problems that farmers encounter, especially during the dry season. We assist and train farmers to identify pests, assess their economic threshold levels and make recommendations for their management.

Our 4-H Program routinely engages youth in agriculture programs, events and activities.

Our sustainable agriculture program provides training and information on ways to reduce soil erosion, maintain soil moisture and improve water use efficiency through the installation of microirrigation systems.

We recommend adapted crop varieties and provide training on topics including soils, plant nutrition, crop rotation and cropping systems.

Our up-coming educational activities include Organic Farming, Farm Safety Practices, and Health and Wellness of Farm Families.

Opportunities exist for developing and improving agriculture in the Virgin Islands and the Cooperative Extension Service is ready to respond to the needs of the agricultural community.

Thank you and I will respond to any questions that you may have.