March 20, 2021

Kenneth L. Gittens
Chair
Committee on Economic Development and Agriculture
34th Legislature of the United States Virgin Islands

Re: Comments on Bill No. 34-0023 – An Act Amending Title 12 to Establish an Invasive Species Eradication Community Program

Good day Senator Gittens, members of the 34th Legislature’s Committee on Economic Development and Agriculture, non-committee members and legislative staff present, and members of the viewing and listening public, my name is Jean-Pierre L. Oriol, Commissioner for the Department of Planning and Natural Resources (DPNR). I have with me today Dr. Nicole Angeli, Dr. William Coles and Dr. Sean Kelly of my Division of Fish and Wildlife staff. Thank you for the opportunity to present testimony on Bill No. 34-0023, an Act establishing an Invasive Species Eradication Community Program under Virgin Islands Code Title 12, Chapter 2, along with an Imprest Account Fund for the payment of bounties established under the program.

The DPNR staff appreciated working with the Sponsor on Bill No. 34-0023. The “Invasive Species Eradication Community Program” clearly defines the problem of invasive species and outlines a flexible management structure so that the Department can quickly respond to new and emergent invasive species. By declaring a bounty and associated educational program, community members may participate voluntarily as Wildlife Control Operators. The Bill also creates a pathway for our community of business owners to address and exterminate invasive species for a fee as Wildlife Control Removal Agents. In doing so, the Bill supports our mandate pursuant to 12 VIC § 105(d) “it shall be unlawful for any person to import or introduce, or cause the importation of any species of plant or animal which does not naturally occur” by allowing business owners the opportunity to become licensed wildlife controllers. The program is similar to what currently occurs in states like Florida and Washington, and increases wildlife control capacity through private-public partnerships and public support of private business.

With respect to the creation of the Imprest Account for payment of bounties collected under this Bill, the Department would state that we do not believe a new account is necessary at this time. Established under 12 VIC § 81(a), there is a fund known as the Fish and Game Fund. Pursuant to 12 VIC § 81(b), funds in the Fish and Game Fund may be used “... for the purposes of administering...”
wildlife restoration projects and enforcing the fish, game and conservation laws under this title.”
With the Invasive Species Eradication Community Program being a conservation initiative established under Title 12 of the Virgin Islands Code, we believe that this existing fund can be used to administer bounty payments when the Department would be required to do so. We understand that the Sponsor's intent is to make the payment to the community as seamless as possible; however, the Government of the Virgin Islands is also trying to maintain a system of controls and payments that are consistent for auditing purposes. There is already a process by which an individual may receive a payment from the Government of the Virgin Islands, and to that end, a payment could be made to any individual using the Fish and Game Fund.

Thank you for the opportunity to present testimony on Bill No. 34-0023, an Act amending Title 12 to Establish an Invasive Species Eradication Community Program. My staff and I are here to answer any questions you may have.