March 20, 2021

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

Re: Testimony on the overall status of the territory’s agricultural industry, the status of the territory’s fish/vegetable markets, the sustainability of our fish and wildlife sector

Good day Senator Gittens, other members of the 34th Legislature’s Committee on Economic Development & 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 & Natural Resources (DPNR). We are present today on the Chair’s request to provide testimony on the status of the Territory’s fish markets, as well as the sustainability of our Territory’s fish and wildlife sector.

The Department of Planning and Natural Resources is mandated with the linked goals of preservation of fishery stocks and promotion of the fishing industry. Multiple objectives to accomplish those goals include supporting the fishing industry, cooperating with and providing data to fisheries scientists, and engaging with policy makers. This year, the opening of a new fish market along with policy dissemination and outreach campaigns support our mission.

Fish Markets

The Department manages two fish markets - the Gustave Quetel Fish Market on St. Thomas and the LaReine Fish Market on St. Croix – pursuant to the authorities under 12 VIC § 325. Long shuttered, the Department completed a capital renovation project on the LaReine market over the past two years and recently opened a facility that will centralize fish selling activities for the island of St. Croix. The market will be managed by the Department to provide fishers a clean, safe place to store their gear and conduct business. The site will also be a new space for commercial and recreational fishers to conduct port samples with the Division of Fish and Wildlife.

The Gustave Quetel Fish Market has been in continuous operation, and in the past year has received some minor improvements. A 40kW generator was installed to provide back-up power, and with the support of the Department of Public Works, the front parking area has recently been paved; the Department will complete paving in the rear of the facility during this fiscal year. In addition, the
Department will be working with Public Works once again to conduct a facility assessment to seek funding under the Department of Interior’s Capital Improvement grant program.

The Department is also seeking to create new fish markets in the Territory. We have started conversations with the Virgin Islands Port Authority for a potential location of a market on St. John and have several ideas for new locations on St. Croix and St. Thomas. The discussions are in their infancy, identifying additional resources for planning and design are required so that we would then be able to access major funding for development.

**Sustainability of Fish and Wildlife**

As was stated previously, the Department is in a rather interesting situation where it must regulate an industry such as fishing, yet also fulfill the mandate pursuant to 11 VIC § 1402 to promote the commercial fishing industry. In order to fulfill both goals, the Department emphasizes sustainability within the fishing industry as a whole. We maintain two local Fisheries Advisory Committees (FACs), one in the St. Croix district, and one for the St. Thomas/St. John district, as well as participate in the Caribbean Fisheries Management Council, comprised of federal, local and regional partners, to discuss catch regulations on species of interest. We have established two liaison positions, one in each district, to actively work with the fishers, keeping them informed of the initiatives being undertaken to promote the sustainability of the fishing industry. The liaison in each district is tasked with one on one outreach to fishers to ensure that catch limits, closed seasons, research projects, and business concerns are heard by the Department. The liaisons also ensure that the fishers are kept up-to-date on matters related to the federal Island-based Fishery Management Plans, which allows each of the districts to be managed independently due to their ecological differences. To address the consumer end of the equation, we announced the Reef Responsible Sustainable Seafood Initiative’s move under the umbrella of the Department and expansion of its scope to educate the restaurant industry on eating locally and sustainably sourced fish as well as educate our grocery store consumers and recreational and commercial fishers. Policy and outreach coupled produce much greater results.

To further promote the commercial fishing industry, the Department is currently working with the Fisheries Advisories Committees to review the status of the commercial fishery and the license moratorium that has been in place since 2001. Our first step is to purge “inactive” license holders from our rolls, and then develop criteria, using sound statistical data and input from the fishers, to allow new fishers to obtain licenses for commercial fishing. We believe that persons willing to engage in the fishing industry legally should have a legal path to entry to conduct business.

Lastly, because it is an extractive use, the Department is seeking to create a recreational licensing program with the requisite regulations. The number of commercial charters in the Territory is equivalent to the number of commercial fishers, and that activity exerts just as much pressure on the fishing industry. Accordingly, it needs to be properly documented for management purposes.

Ample opportunity lies in our waters for our community. Our mandates in the Department focus on the centralized promotion of the fishing industry for today's fishers and the fishers of the future. The opening of the LaReine Fish Market, the general upkeep of the Gustave Quetel Market, and the review of the commercial fishing moratorium are all parts of that promotion. We welcome the opportunity to work with the commercial fishing industry as we ensure its sustainability for generations to come.

This concludes my testimony at this time, and the Department is prepared to answer questions at this time.