

House Committee on Agriculture Subcommittee on Biotechnology, Horticulture, and Research

Farmer Perspectives of the Farming Industry in the US Virgin Islands

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Testimony of Nathaniel D. Olive, Ph.D.

Good day members of Congress, supportive staff, fellow testifiers, and the listening public. My name is Nate Olive and I am an owner/operator farmer at the USDA certified organic Ridge to Reef Farm on the island of St. Croix. I am also the elected president of the Virgin Islands Farmers Alliance (VIFA). I am here today to share my own experience as well as that of other farmers from my area in navigating federal support of farming in the United States Virgin Islands. Where appropriate I will also attempt to elucidate a little of the relevant experience of my other fellow farmers to the best of my ability and knowledge. I sincerely hope that my input can help make a difference in improving the quality of life for farmers in the US Virgin Islands and beyond. I share the belief that a strong focus on building capacity of small and medium sized farms in our territory is ultimately the only way in the long run to strengthen and sustain a viable, secure, and sovereign local food system.

I will start by telling you a bit about Ridge to Reef Farm, our VI Farmers Alliance, and the general state of agriculture in the Virgin Islands from the farmers' perspective. Next, I will share some relevant experiences with federal programs that fall under the USDA Farm Bill. Finally, would like to share a few suggestions that may help improve the federal support of farmers in small insular rural areas like the Virgin Islands.

First, Ridge to Reef Farm is the only USDA certified organic farm on over 100 acres in the Virgin Islands and is among the most productive. Our mission is to help reverse the trend of food import dependency, which is greater than 98%, for our insular territory, through ecologically regenerative and culturally appropriate agricultural practices in the region. For 12 years we have maintained a diverse planting regime of over 100 varieties of organic fruits and vegetables. We also raise pasture-raised sheep and hogs that are not certified organic due to the lack of available cost-effective organic certified feed sources. Like all farms currently in the territory we grow for our local markets. Our primary markets include market stands, supermarkets, a Community Supported Agriculture membership program, and the territory's Farm to School program for which we serve as a multi-farm aggregation hub under contract with the VI Department of Education. In addition to crop sales we participate in agritourism activities such as tours, farm to table dinners, and the hosting of volunteer groups for farm stays, which are significant value-added part of our educational outreach and financial sustainability.

Next, The Virgin Islands Farmers Alliance (VIFA) is a grassroots domestic non-profit founded in 2018 and incorporated in 2019 to provide a unified voice for farmers in the territory. We started off as a collective of 5 professional farmers who regularly work together for the

federally funded Farm to School program. After losing contracts created for our local market to foreign producers, we realized we had to band together to protect, advocate, and educate for our common local agricultural interests. Today we have over 100 members including farmers, farm family members, rising farmers, and farm supporters across the 3 major Virgin Islands of St. Croix, St. Thomas, and St. John. Together we coordinate Farm to School deliveries among other co-marketing activities, test various vegetable seed varieties under a Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (SARE) grant, and will soon be establishing a food hub storage facility for Alliance members with the support of World Central Kitchen's Food Producer Network.

As we meet today, the state of agriculture in the US Virgin Islands is again in its toddler phase. Agriculture was recently reborn here decades after the island shifted away in the 1960s in a top-down effort from an agrarian society towards heavy industry. At that time sugar cane was the central crop produced among many other speciality crops and grass-fed Senepol beef grown for local consumption and for export. After that period of time, small local farms could no longer compete with increasing low cost imports and most farms closed for good. Yet in the past 20 years, demand for locally produced fresh foods has steadily risen. Now, demand is soaring as price points and consumer demand have leveled out. There is a broad base of support for agriculture to rejoin the economic development of the Virgin Islands. Yet many challenges remain, largely due to our small population and land area, a relatively large local government that lends to a favor-driven political environment, and our insular geography that greatly increases farm input costs in every way in comparison to our import market competition. Nearly all farms here are considered small farm operations and the economic rules of efficiency and scale continue to work against us. So today, local agriculture in the VI is energetically trying to find its footing so that it may mature into the grown-up industry that our people require. But like other insular rural areas, it cannot reach its optimal potential without special considerations of support through the Farm Bill.

Now, I will address our experience with USDA Farm Bill related programs:

First, one of the most effective programs has been the NRCS' EQIP conservation program. At Ridge to Reef Farm, we have used this program to dig wells, erect livestock fencing, establish rainwater catchment for irrigation, and construct a high tunnel for tomato and cucumber production. Many other farms have utilized this important program for similar purposes. The problems with the program are 1) the reimbursement nature of the program which is out of reach for most VI farmers. Even though there is a chance to get some of that money up front, it requires a short project completion deadline which is not feasible for projects that require significant input imports such as construction materials, 2) the multi-year timeframe from project application to approval for implementation, and 3) the anticipated cost-share ends up being a much lower percent because our costs are exponentially higher. For example, our high tunnel was supposed to be 90% but it ended up being around 60% of the federal anticipated implementation value from higher shipping and construction costs common in the continental US.

Second, USDA disaster recovery programs such as debris removal were absolutely farm-saving after the impacts of hurricanes Irma and Maria in 2017 -Thank you! I would not be speaking to you today without this program. Unfortunately, however, our farm was unable to complete the fencing recovery and fruit tree replacement programs that we were approved for. This is because we were unable to front the cost after being economically devastated by the disasters and did not have the means to pay up front for an unknown period of processing and eventual federal reimbursement. The other complicating aspect was that producers were largely kept in the dark by the USDA about what disaster recovery costs would be reimbursed and at what rate. Without knowing complete program details including cost details, farmers were exposed to the risk of acquiring debt that we may not have reimbursed. Therefore, much of the funds made available for disaster recovery for us were left under utilized.

Third, while Ridge to Reef Farm is USDA certified organic, we remain the one and only in the territory. While it seems like a strong niche position, we would rather have more company for partnerships. The costs of establishing and maintaining organic certification is drastically higher on island territories and needs greater support in cost-share programs than what currently is offered. We simply would not be certified today without the federal cost-share program which saves us \$750 a year on program related costs, which total approximately \$2000 annually plus the unvalued administrative hours on our small farm. The primary reason for low participation in organic is geographic, since inspectors must travel by air and receive accommodations, meals, ground transportation, and other related costs.

Fourth, we were the first farm in the USVI to be awarded a Value-Added Producer Grant. This grant was to create expand our agroforestry plan into fruit shares on our CSA program. We received the grant to write a planning grant. After completing that project we were later denied the implementation grant and but we plan to reapply.

Fifth, as mentioned above, we participate in the federally funded Farm to School Special nutrition program since it started in 2014. We send crops every week that are gathered from local farms to the central school warehouse. We see a need for greater oversight on the award of these contracts to ensure that locally grown crops are given preference and contracts are executed with integrity.

Some other relevant programs that we have participated in are:

Non-insured Crop Disaster Assistance Program (after 2017 hurricanes)

Livestock Forage Disaster Program (usually drought related)

Geographically Disadvantaged Farmer program (needs a boost, helpful but inadequate)

USDA Rural Energy Program

Finally, I would like to share a few humble suggestions to strengthen the Farm Bill for farmers in insular areas:

- 1) Increase funding directly to farms instead of channeling through the local government. Be careful of funding that creates competition with the existing farming community with our small population.
- 2) Increase capacity of our local USDA offices to provide more on-farm support and grant writing/program application assistance. Also, reduce the amount of paperwork required from farms to participate.
- 3) Raise the expected costs for EQIP conservation practices so that cost share percentages are on par with the rest of the country
- 4) Remove barriers of program participation by removing the reimbursement nature of many programs such as EQIP and hurricane disaster programs.
- 5) Establish a means for farmers to get individual health insurance policies, which are currently unavailable.

Thank you for your attention and support in promoting better food production in the USVI and other insular areas faced with the same challenges. I am happy to answer any questions you may have.

Sincerely,

Nathaniel "Nate" Olive, PhD.