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Testimony submitted by: Congresswoman Stacey E. Plaskett (VI)

Thank you Chairman Aderholt, Ranking Member Bishop, for the opportunity to testify on appropriations for the Department of Agriculture and related programs over the next fiscal year. This legislation will serve as a statement of the commitment from the federal government to address some of our most pressing local needs in the Virgin Islands.

In the United States territories, despite being home to nearly 4 million Americans, we are too often left out of important programs or underfunded compared to benefits available to Americans living on the mainland United States. As a result, it is more difficult for the islands to improve economic conditions. The islands must transition from 100 percent reliance on imported oil to a clean, sustainable energy future and relief from power costs that are more than double the national average.

In addition, by their geography, the territories are critically vulnerable to natural forces unique to daily living in an island environment – hurricanes, tropical storms and sea blast, among others. We face a formidable challenge in adapting and responding to the effects on

infrastructure, economic development, food security and natural resources.

Furthermore, we face challenges as rural communities, which are generally beset by a lack of access to affordable housing and other necessities. Rural areas often see less banking industry competition and consumer choice, often resulting in higher prices, and ultimately less access to affordable mortgage loans.

We are fortunate to have federal rural development support that assists our communities with maintaining decent housing and infrastructure, with Department of Agriculture programs providing a critical lifeline to low-income families in the Virgin Islands. Through low-cost loans, grants, and other assistance, USDA rural development assistance improves conditions and quality of life, and frankly, we desperately need more from them.

The Rural Housing Service's single family housing loans, for example, are one of the most critical tools to help smaller, lower-income and more remote rural communities gain access to mortgage credit. Section 502 lending is the only federal home ownership program that exclusively targets low- and very-low income rural families. The program provides essential funding for families in my district to fill in the gap in the

private market, allowing those who would otherwise be unable to access affordable mortgage credit achieve the American dream of home ownership.

I therefore oppose the freezing of funds for this program at the FY 2016 level, which would amount to a reduction of 20 percent since 2010. The funding increase made to this account in the bill reported out of your committee last April is a positive step in the right direction, and I appreciate that progress, although I would certainly encourage further investment.

Rental assistance is also a primary source of housing in the communities I represent. This is often the only way that housing is affordable, and so I also urge increases to the Section 521 and Section 515 rental housing accounts as well.

Robust infrastructure development, including electricity, broadband and telecommunications, water and wastewater, and construction of essential community facilities is the foundation for rural viability. The Virgin Islands are in particular need of broadband infrastructure. We are currently at a disadvantage in access to broadband technologies, in part because of higher costs than on the mainland, so we need greater broadband grant funding in the Rural Utilities Service budget.

Many of the people living in the Virgin Islands do not have ordinary access to a computer connected to the internet, and this continues to have negative impact on educational opportunities and workforce development to grow our economy. As a remote location, internet and broadband could serve a vital role in creating jobs in our community, and because of our children's inability to physically access the resources on the mainland, increased broadband could make a greater impact in education to close the now existing digital divide.

Regarding agricultural research services, the University of the Virgin Islands maintains an Agricultural Experiment Station as part of its Research and Public Service Component. The AES conducts basic and applied research to meet the needs of the local agricultural community in increasing production, improving efficiency, developing new enterprises, preserving and propagating germplasm unique to the Virgin Islands, and protecting the natural resource base.

Financial support for this enterprise comes from both public and private sources. However, the most significant funding source is the federal-state partnership managed by the National Institute for Food and Agriculture – the Agriculture Department's extramural science agency.

I therefore strongly favor increases in NIFA programs that support research, education and extension efforts at land-grant universities. There's never been a more important time in agriculture for additional research, whether it's pollinators, antimicrobial resistance, pests and diseases that we're dealing with as a result of a changing climate.

On the nutrition side of your discretionary budget, I believe it is critical that the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (or "WIC") is adequately funded so that at-risk women, infants, and children can continue to benefit from this program and that no eligible family is cut off.

Lastly, as to your purview over the FDA budget, I understand that your bill last spring provided the requested \$10 million for activities related to the response to the Zika virus and other emerging threats. This funding is very important for the Virgin Islands and I very much hope that this will be included in your legislation this year.

Appropriations bills are oftentimes a lot about numbers, but behind each of these numbers there are individuals and people that we care deeply about, and I believe that must be kept in mind when funds for all of these accounts are considered. With that, I thank you again for the opportunity to present my testimony today.