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Farmers take formal role in development of plan

By SARA KIRKPATRICK Daily News Staff
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Kevin Taubert, Yvette Browne, Denise Toubert and Dale Browne of Sejah Farm took first place and grand champion honors for their fruits and vegetables.

Daily News photo by MISTY WINTER

The submission of a territorywide agricultural plan to the V.I. Legislature has been delayed until December, but University of the Virgin Islands President David Hall, co-chair of the plan's task force, says it will be worth the wait.

Three farmers have now taken a formal role in the plan's development and "their presence has already been beneficial, and we can present the best and strongest plan to the governor and legislature," Hall said.

Nate Olive, owner of Ridge to Reef Farm; Dale Browne, owner of Sejah Farm; and Royce Creque, president of Greenridge Guavaberry Farm were selected by the Territorial Agriculture Group during an October forum.

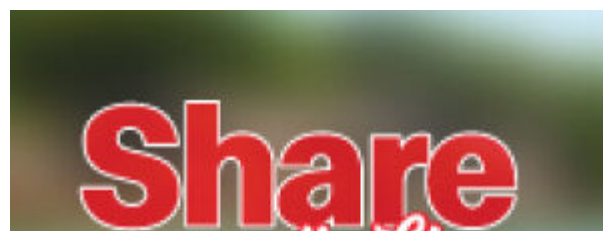
"Without farmers' input in the decision-making role, we were already seeing some big gaps, and we wanted to ensure the plan would be successful," Olive said. "We are very thankful for the willingness of Dr. Hall and the taskforce members to welcome us on board."

Under the legislation, Hall and Agriculture Commissioner Positive Nelson were selected to develop the agriculture plan that includes recommendations on a regulatory framework, business model, local farm fund, advisory committee, local food symbol and an education and training framework.

As the task force developed preliminary recommendations, it held four town halls and smaller breakout sessions with stakeholders, but many full-time farmers felt they were not being heard and wanted to be directly involved in the planning process.

"We strongly suggested seats on the task force itself, and that there was an extension, and they responded favourably," said Olive, who is also president of the V.I. Farmers Alliance.

"We left it up to the various farming groups and associations to decide who they wanted to be on the task force," Hall said.



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The two task force chairmen chose UVI Agriculture School Dean Usman Adamu, UVI Business School Dean Kendra Harris, Assistant Agriculture Commissioner Diana Collingwood, Deputy Agriculture Commissioner Hannah Carty and Harith Wickrema of Island Green Living to help with the task.

“When we speak, we are representing all the other farmers that we talk to,” Olive said. “This is a short time frame, so we are actively contacting and communicating with fellow farmers.”

“If you don’t have producers central to the process, how do we make sure the policy meets us where we are at?” asked Sommer Sibilly-Brown, of the V.I. Good Food Coalition. “I am happy that at this stage, that farmers are being integrated.”

Sibilly-Brown said that while there are a number of grassroots organizations that focus on local food sourcing, the agricultural plan will play a key role in the trajectory of the territory’s farming industry.

“The policy piece is how we are mandating the way forward. It’s integral for the next 20, 30, 40 years,” Sibilly-Brown said.

“I think everyone will benefit. That’s what happens when we decide to work together,” Olive said.

A PowerPoint presentation on the plan is available at doa.vi.gov/agplan-powerpoint, and the task force is still accepting recommendations from the farming community. For more information, visit doa.vi.gov/ag-plan.