

Governor Signs V.I. Agricultural Plan

February 6, 2023



Neat lines of produce are planted at Ridge to Reef Farm on St Croix. (Photo courtesy of Ridge to Reef Farm Director Nate Olive)

Before traveling to Washington, D.C., for meetings, Gov. Albert Bryan Jr. signed a bill funding \$2.2 million for the V.I. Agricultural Plan — [the official agriculture plan](#) for the territory.

First, Bill 35-0003 established the Agriculture Business Center in the Small Business Development Center to provide resources for small, large and commercial farm businesses. Helpful resources can include bookkeeping, technical skills, grant writing, training needs and certifications. Aid also includes help with establishing farm cooperatives. To carry out these purposes, \$250,000 will be appropriated.

The bill also specifies that the Food and Farm Advisory Committee can amend the V.I. Agriculture Plan, with amendments submitted to the V.I. Legislature, which can also make changes to the plan.

As part of the plan, the University of the Virgin Islands will receive \$250,000 annually for writing grants to apply for federal funds for water, irrigation, infrastructure and "other agriculture needs for the Virgin Islands." Another \$120,000 will be awarded to UVI for a grant writer for the Food and Farm Advisory Committee.

UVI also will receive another \$250,000 for the committee's operations, including food symbol development and marketing, data collection and analysis, and to create short-term and long-term plans regarding critical water and infrastructure needs in conjunction with the Agriculture Department.

To establish the Food and Farm Fund for farmers, \$13,000 is being set aside to be distributed according to the recommendations and guidelines established by the Food and Farm Advisory Committee. The section also states

that the V.I. Legislature, from time to time, will appropriate monies for the "Local Food and Farm Fund."

To hire "critical positions," including the Food and Farm Coordinator, the V.I. Agriculture Department will be appropriated \$350,000. The department is required, within 180 days, to submit a list of positions, titles and salaries to the Senate.

The V.I. Economic Development Authority also will receive \$500,000 to establish a public-private investment fund and a Farmer's Grant Matching Fund. The public-private fund will focus on increasing farmers' production with activities such as hydroponics, aquaponics, and technology enhancements. The Farmer's Grant will provide farmers with a match while applying for federal and other grants.

Additionally, the V.I. Education Department will receive \$500,000 to develop a curriculum, training program and pilot program to secure a sustainable local food production system in the territory to include pre-K through high school.

The last item names around \$1.5 million for legal fees incurred through a class action suit filed by "specific employees" of the University of the Virgin Islands. That sum is not included in the \$2.2 million appropriation.

The appropriations total \$2,233,000 (not including class action fees). The funding will be appropriated from the General Fund by the end of Sept. 30.

Bill 35-0003 was sponsored by Sen. Donna Frett-Gregory, and others and submitted by the Agricultural Plan Task Force to the Senate on Dec. 29, 2021.

"The passage of this measure has been a long time coming and is a step in the right direction for the agriculture industry in the territory. It also demonstrates to our federal partners that we are serious about developing the agriculture industry. It is time we put our money where our mouth is when it comes to agriculture," Frett-Gregory said in a news release Monday.

The Agriculture Plan Task Force comprised David Hall, UVI president; Positive Nelson, Agriculture commissioner; Kendra Harris, dean of the UVI Business School; Usman Adamu, dean of the UVI Agriculture School; Diana Collingwood, assistant commissioner of the Agriculture Department; Hannah Carty, Department of Agriculture; Harith Wickrema, Island Green Living; and farmers Nate Olive, Dale Brown and Royce Creque.