

COMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AND
AGRICULTURE

06/02/2023 – REASSIGNED TO THE COMMITTEE ON BUDGET, APPROPRIATIONS AND FINANCE

BILL NO. 35-0089

Thirty-Fifth Legislature of the Virgin Islands

May 31, 2023

An Act appropriating \$600,000 to the Department of Agriculture to be used to fund farmers in the Virgin Islands that produce crops and other food products; and for other related purposes

PROPOSED BY: Senators Javan E. James, Sr. and Angel L. Bolques, Jr.

WHEREAS, the Virgin Islands needs to establish a sustainable food system that addresses production, transportation, transformation, market sales, consumption, waste, and composting;

WHEREAS, farmers in the Virgin Islands find it extremely difficult to maintain their farms with a limited number of staff and a lack of large farming equipment, such as tractors and plows;

WHEREAS, the Department of Agriculture does not have the resources to fulfill the vast number of requests to clear and plow land due to its limited amount of personnel and heavy machinery;

WHEREAS, many farmers suffer from a lack of water and insufficient irrigation systems and rely on the Department of Agriculture to provide water for their farms;

1 **WHEREAS**, farms in the Virgin Islands have not adopted efficient, new farming
2 technology because of their inability to afford it and therefore cannot compete with other
3 Caribbean agricultural industries;

4 **WHEREAS**, St. Croix was once a leader in agriculture due to its climate, soil, and
5 potential access to water;

6 **WHEREAS**, the agriculture industry in St. Croix lost its capital due to the rise in the oil
7 refining industry and has since been unable to maintain a competitive level of farming that
8 would provide food sustainability, especially in the event of a disaster;

9 **WHEREAS**, food imported into the Virgin Islands in 2019 cost \$128,440,660;

10 **WHEREAS**, the people of the Virgin Islands are suffering because the price of food has
11 increased due to the lack of investment in the agricultural industry and the need for retailers to
12 import food rather than export it;

13 **WHEREAS**, the Virgin Islands currently does not have the means to create a sustainable
14 and independent food system due to the lack of investment in the agricultural industry and the
15 inability for large, potentially high-production farms to afford to produce large crops year
16 round; Now, Therefore,

17 ***Be it enacted by the Legislature of the Virgin Islands:***

18 **SECTION 1.** (a) The sum of \$600,000 is appropriated in the fiscal year ending
19 September 30, 2023, from the Community Facility Trust Fund to the Department of Agriculture
20 to be used as provided in section 2.

21 (b) The funds appropriated in subsection (a) remain available until expended.

22 **SECTION 2.** (a) The Department of Agriculture shall prepare an application for farmers
23 to receive funds;

(b) The Department of Agriculture may disburse funding to farms that meet that:

(1) are located in the Virgin Islands with a minimum of 20 livestock acres or a minimum of five crop acres;

(2) have proper documentation, including a tax clearance letter issued by the Virgin Islands Bureau of Internal Revenue and other legal documents as the Department of Agriculture may require; and

(3) produces crops with a proven record of distribution to retailers and all farmers shall submit records of distribution to retailers within the past twelve months.

(c) Prior to receipt of funds, each farmer must submit a budget outlining the use of funds. Thereafter, farmers must submit a twelve-month expense report detailing the funds usage, and receipts of items purchased. Failure to submit the expense report and receipts shall result in forfeiture of funds. The farmer shall submit an expense report and receipts to the Department of Agriculture 14 months after receiving the funds. The submission of the expense report and receipts continue until all funds have been exhausted.

(d) Each farm shall receive funds in the amount of \$20,000, to be disbursed in a one-time payment. The Department of Agriculture shall set aside \$300,000 for the St. Croix district and \$300,000 for the St. Thomas/St. John district. The funds must be divided between seven livestock farmers and eight crop farmers for each district.

(e) Funds may be used towards the purchase of agriculture-related products, items or equipment but may also be used to offset the cost of part-time salaries.

(f) The Department of Agriculture shall repossess agriculture-related equipment purchased with grant funds or file criminal charges or do both if a farmer knowingly applies for a grant with the intent to commit fraud.

(g) The Department of Agriculture shall ensure that all farmers meet the requirements under this act and provide the Department of Finance with the names of farmers who have met the criteria for an award of funds. The names of the recipients of these funds must be published in all local newspapers and on the Department of Agriculture's website.

(h) All applications for qualified applicants must be submitted to the Chair of the Committee on Economic Development and Agriculture and the Chair of the Committee on Budget, Appropriations and Finance. All sensitive information must be redacted before submitting to the chairs.

BILL SUMMARY

This bill appropriates the sum of \$600,000 from the Community Facility Trust Fund to the Department of Agriculture to fund farms in the Virgin Islands for crop farming and other food products.

BR23-0270/January 23, 2023/AA/Revised March 3, 2023