

Agriculture Left Out of Recovery Conversation, Farmer Says as Officials Cite Need for Water, Storage and Infrastructure

Sejah Farms co-founder Dale Browne said local food production is often omitted from resilience planning, while Agriculture Commissioner Louis Petersen cited water, storage, distribution and power needs as VIDA pursues funding for infrastructure.

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With Friday's Economic Development Summit focusing on the territory's recovery projects, workforce needs and energy future, St. Croix farmer Dale Browne urged officials to confront what he said remains a persistent omission from discussions about resilience: local food production.

Mr. Browne, co-founder of Sejah Farms on St. Croix, said agriculture continues to receive less attention than other sectors, even as the Virgin Islands discusses long-term economic development and self-sufficiency.

“We continue to talk about oil energy. We even go to education, but one sector that is always and oftentimes omitted is local food production,” Mr. Browne said. For him, agriculture is “given less of a thought” during conversations on resilience.

The summit was branded as a forum to leverage opportunities for economic development as the territory manages \$25 million in recovery projects. But Mr. Browne argued that agriculture must be part of any serious conversation about resilience, particularly if the Virgin Islands wants to grow more of the food residents consume.

Representatives of the Economic Development Authority told Mr. Browne that initiatives are in place to strengthen agriculture. However, he maintained that those efforts are focused too heavily on the future outcome, without enough attention to the conditions farmers face now.

“We have fast forwarded to what should be, or what the outcome should be, but on the back end there is no support to get there, and that is the problem,” Mr. Browne stated. “We're investing in the future and not now,” he added.

Mr. Browne did not place blame on the Department of Agriculture. Instead, he described the department as “one of the largest underserved agencies or departments in the Government of the Virgin Islands right now.”

He said the department is unable to provide services that are “relevant to the development of the industry and assisting farmers technologically” because the agriculture commissioner is not adequately supported.

“He's a nucleus and everybody around him is [who] executes what he ordered. That is not so,” Mr. Browne told the panel, which was moderated by Senator Novelle Francis, chair of the Committee on Budget, Appropriations and Finance.

“We will never get to that end game if we continue to neglect or disconnect ourselves from what is present,” he warned.

In a second panel, Mr. Browne was able to address Agriculture Commissioner Dr. Louis Petersen directly.

“You have one of the hardest jobs as a department in the Government of the Virgin Islands: given nothing and they expect you to produce plenty. That's not possible,” he said.

Mr. Browne said the conversation around agriculture must go deeper.

“We are talking about [the] way forward, we are talking about trust, we are talking about the fact that we are spinning the same wheels over and over again.”

He closed his comments by saying the Department of Agriculture is “undermined, undervalued, and disconnected from every other department within the territory.”

Mr. Browne's remarks followed comments from Dr. Petersen about the limited, and in some cases non-existent, agricultural infrastructure across the Virgin Islands.

During a panel led by Senator Marise James, Dr. Petersen emphasized the need for water resources, storage systems, distribution systems and reliable power to support agriculture.

The Virgin Islands Department of Agriculture has developed the Farmland Infrastructure Improvement Program, but Dr. Petersen acknowledged that funding remains a challenge.

“We need money for the program,” he said.

Dr. Petersen said engagements with partners including the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the Natural Resources Conservation Service have helped address the need for road access and water improvements in Estate Bordeaux. According to him, the USDA has “invested at least \$12 million in a plan that goes through approximately 2030.”

“That is only the beginning. We have discussed with them, moving on from that particular project to other areas that we need to service,” Dr. Petersen assured.

As recovery funds continue moving through the territory, Dr. Petersen said the Department of Agriculture has secured \$3.5 million in ARPA funding. That money is being used for the construction of water storage in Estate Bordeaux.

Much of the territory’s recovery discussion has focused on resilient buildings, workforce needs and major infrastructure. Mr. Browne’s comments placed agriculture within that broader frame, arguing that resilience must also include the ability to produce more food locally.

If the Virgin Islands wants to increase resilience and self-sustainability, growing more of what residents eat will be a crucial part of the work ahead.