

Funding Mix-Up at OMB Diverts Food and Farm Council Money to UVI Entity, Leaving Council Underfunded

A misallocation by OMB sent funds meant for the Local Food and Farm Council to UVI's Office of Sponsored Programs, halting efforts to hire a coordinator vital to implementing the territory's agriculture plan and food security goals.

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Agriculture Commissioner Louis Petersen. By. V.I. LEGISLATURE.

A mix-up at the Office of Management and Budget has resulted in funding earmarked for the Local Food and Farm Council being directed to an "entity at UVI" instead of the rightful recipient.

“The reality is this, OMB actually did release the monies, but it never came to us,” said Agriculture Commissioner Dr. Louis Petersen. He appeared before the Committee on Economic Development and Agriculture on Monday, where he told lawmakers that the money intended for his department remains inaccessible.

An amendment to [Act 8979](#) providing instructions to reappropriate the funding to the Council, was signed on December 19, 2024. However, the funds reportedly remain at the University of the Virgin Islands’ Office of Sponsored Programs.

Meanwhile, the Food and Farm Council – tasked with strengthening farming, fishing, and food security in the territory – is beleaguered by insufficient funding to accomplish its eight mandates.

Chief among them is the need to hire a Local Food and Farm Coordinator. For council member Harith Wickrema, onboarding that individual is “crucial” to making the territory’s agriculture plan a reality. Sommer Sibilly-Brown, executive director of Virgin Islands Good Food, has already been identified for the position and currently provides services voluntarily.

The coordinator is at the “core” of the agriculture plan, a sentiment shared by UVI President Dr. Safiya George, who also sits on the Council. The position of coordinator has “not yet been activated because the funding necessary for salary and operations has not yet been released,” George testified. Coordination is therefore taking place in a “limited capacity,” and implementation of the agriculture plan “remains fragmented and reactive rather than strategic.”

Filling the position of coordinator will “immediately strengthen accountability, interagency communication, and progress tracking,” George said.

The Council also requires funding to bolster the staffing and administrative support for the Local Food and Farm Council Advisory Committee, which is the 5th mandate of the overall plan. For now, work continues through the “commitment of its members,” George stated.

With funding still stuck in the pipeline, Mr. Petersen assured listeners that the Department of Agriculture “continues to engage in frequent and routine dialog with the Office of Management and Budget to resolve this issue.”

Senator Novelle Francis, who signed off on the amended Act 8979 as the then-President of the Senate, promised to intervene where possible. Mr. Francis currently chairs the Committee on Budget, Appropriations and Finance.

Senator Hubert Frederick, who chaired Monday’s meeting, also advocated for a speedy resolution in order to onboard the necessary personnel. “We need to get that coordinator on there,” he said. “Let’s see what we can do to get that person in there.”

Outside of the local appropriation, Petersen stated that the Department of Agriculture is working to secure “external resources” to address other departmental needs related to agricultural advancements. Nonetheless, he warned that “the sustained long-term staffing of the Department of Agriculture will require local funding.” DOA requires additional staff to support work in agriculture outside of the Local Food and Farm Council.