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US Virgin Islands

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Thank you Chairwoman Delegate Plaskett and ranking member for the opportunity to testify before the **House Committee on Agriculture Subcommittee on Biotechnology, Horticulture, and Research.**

I am here today to share my experiences and that of Dr. Nate Olive's of Ridge to Reef Farm, **Farmer Perspectives of the Organic Industry in the US Virgin Islands**, to bring awareness to the need for further support for organic agriculture in the USVI .

It is truly an honor to now be before you here in the nation's capitol adding our voices to the many who see a brighter future for our country through regenerative forms of organic agriculture. More than ever we need understanding and support in order to ensure a future Virgin Islands organic farming community and a healthy local food system.

My name is Shelli Brin, a multi generational Virgin Islander. I am a member of the newly forming VI Farmers Alliance, on the board of the Virgin Islands Good Food Coalition, and am a farmer and an advocate for organic food, local food security, and the Farm to School program. For the past 10 years I have worked alongside Dr. Olive, farm owner of Ridge to Reef Farm in St Croix, and since February I am currently working on an agroforestry project in St Thomas, at Hideaway Farm.

Compared to many demographic areas in the US, the USVI has an incredible strong community of farmers and residents traditionally participating in farming on many levels. This is a farming community worth investing in and worth USDA's programs. Today I'll share with you just our story.

Ridge to Reef Farm, located in Frederiksted on the island of St. Croix, is the only USDA certified organic farm and is among the most productive farms in the United States Virgin Islands. Over the past decade, Farm owner Nate Olive and I have maintained a diverse planting regime of over 100 varieties of organic fruits and vegetables across 150 acres primarily for local consumption in the territory. We also husband pasture-raised sheep and hogs that are not certified organic due to the lack of available cost-effective organic certified feed and supplies. Our mission is to help reverse the trend of food import dependency, which is greater than 98% imports, for our insular territory while demonstrating ecologically regenerative and culturally appropriate agricultural practices in the region.

Primary markets for our products include market stands, supermarkets, a Community Supported Agriculture membership program, and the territory's Farm to School program for which we serve as a multi-farm aggregation hub. In addition, agritourism activities such as tours, farm to table dinners, and the hosting of volunteer groups for farm stays are a significant value-added part of our mission-based educational outreach and financial sustainability.

First, as a small farm in a small market in a large sea, we are thankful to have federal support in the form of programs and grants that help us implement conservation practices and create new economic development opportunities through value-added products. In the past 2 years, we have received a \$7500 reimbursement as a match for an off-grid solar irrigation system batteries through the USDA Rural Energy program, approximately \$18,000 (50% of actual cost) for a high-tunnel for tomato, pepper, and cucumber production from the Environmental Quality and Incentives Program, and approximately \$22,600 in a 50% match to conduct a feasibility plan for fruit market expansion with a Value Added Producer Grant (VAPG). We eagerly await the release of the 2019 VAPG grant in order to implement our plan for long-term agroforestry food production. These programs are crucial to improving our farm's impact in our community, however we mostly survive from our own hard work and supportive customer base and do so with farming as our sole occupation.

We also are participating in storm recovery programs through the Farm Service Agency, which are still ongoing from the impacts of hurricanes Irma and Maria. However, our small local office is extremely understaffed and is aligned under the Puerto Rico office, which leads to constant and significant delays for information or decisions regarding these programs. Additionally, most of these programs are reimbursement based, leaving us and most other farmers unable to fully participate since our businesses and income were slammed to halt from the natural disasters. Also, the USDA is not forthcoming in helping us understand what costs can be covered and what rates. They seem more concerned with preventing program abuse than farm recovery, leaving us in the dark about program details and therefore exposing us to risk of acquiring debt that we may not have reimbursed, as we have already seen documented with local farms since the storms.

Second, being the lone organic farm in an isolated territory has limited benefits and significant challenges. A local market survey we conducted revealed that more than half of our customers don't require certified organic as long as they know it's "grown organically". However, without a standard set of organic practices to be followed, they have no way of knowing as most farms are not fully aware of the National Organic Program standards and practices and many farms buy in crops from other farms with no transparency. In the USVI there is zero enforcement of USDA organic marketing rules, which drastically diminishes the organic label. Customers are often deceived by the use of the word organic in farm names and crop descriptions. Consequently, the value of being certified is greatly diminished. We embrace other forms of food production and believe farmers of different methods all need to work together to enhance food security, such as in our farm to school hub. Yet the integrity of certified organic production needs to be protected for it to be worth implementing on a wide scale for sake of human and environmental health.

Third, costs of establishing and maintaining organic certification is drastically higher on island territories and needs greater support in cost-share programs than what currently is offered. We simply would not be certified today without the federal cost-share program which saves us \$750 a year on program related costs, which total approximately \$2000 annually. The primary reason is geographic, since inspectors must travel by air and receive accommodations, meals, ground transportation, and other related costs. For example, we had to change

certification companies 8 years ago because the former company quoted over \$4000 for a single inspection in travel costs. We are fortunate now to have an inspector available from nearby Puerto Rico, however, we remain vulnerable to any changes that may occur and subsequently threaten our ability to afford certification.

Fourth, a lack of access to OMRI-approved materials such as fertilizers, pesticides, seeds, propagation materials, and many other things needed so successful organic production is a perennial problem that limits our production and drives up costs exponentially. Very few companies will directly ship organic supplies here, and some items are very hard or impossible to get. Because of shipping restrictions placed on the territory treating it like a different country, we routinely go through a purchase procedure only to be told at the end of the process they do not ship here. Options then are to ship to Florida to then be shipped on a boat, which is subject to delays in customs and excise taxes, even though we are supposed to be exempt from excise taxes as a farm. For example, we often lose half a valuable day proving that our empty cardboard produce boxes are for our farm. This is true for all farms, not just organic. However, because we are the only organic farm few stores carry OMRI approved items, so we have to ship in more. Additionally, we can't get items with roots or soil like grafted premier tomato plants, since they would die in freight shipping and aren't allowed to be shipped directly to us.

Overall, we maintain our certification because we want our customers to be confident that they are receiving the highest quality of food available and avoiding genetically modified foods. However, as it stands today, we likely do not benefit greater than the costs to be certified organic. Also, we want our customers to know for certain that their food was grown in a way that helps repair the natural systems of the land and sea instead of unnecessarily impairing them. When you live on a small island you are faced with limits too often taken for granted on the continent. Our waterways, coral reefs, and fisheries are intricately intertwined with the way we produce food on land. So, if we are serious about turning the tide of import dependency to local food production, it is crucial to proceed with organic practices that won't ruin our natural food systems. We must avoid creating aquatic dead zones that result from over-nutrication of the waters such as seen in the tragic example south of the outflow of the Mississippi River. Our food security and sovereignty depends on it.

In just a short 10 years in working our soil and starting our farm, we have farmed through floods, droughts, suffered serious livestock losses from neighbor's dogs, and dealing with the territorial aftermath of two category 5 hurricanes. Organic farming is already difficult in the tropical region in that we have no freeze that gives our crops a break. Now that our climate changes are getting more intense, we are now experiencing serious heat waves, and increase in pests and diseases. With ocean acidification and polluted run off after heavy rains, we are rapidly losing our food sources from the sea as well. We are truly on the front lines of how organic will hold up to a rapidly changing environment.

Finally, from our perspective as organic producers, our recommendations for the future of the NOP are:

- 1) Encourage more consumer and producer education about the NOP and organics in general in rural areas, specifically in isolated island territories.
- 2) Increase the cost share amount proportionally to the higher costs required in insular areas.
- 3) Relax restrictions on organic materials and supplies needed for organic production in territories that are treated differently than continental locations in shipping.
- 4) Encourage state and territorial agricultural authorities to support better compliance with organic marketing rules to protect organic integrity in the marketplace.
- 5) Build the capacity and decision-making ability of local USDA offices to better represent organics and other programs available to farmers and get to the point where officers can regularly visit farms and help with paperwork.
- 6) Reduce the amount of paperwork required for organic certification, particularly for small farms.

Having farmed these past years with Dr Olive and now expanding my farming to St Thomas, has been a rewarding experience for us. Farming is difficult yet we reach milestones every month for the territory.

This is a challenging environment to farm. In addition to searching for certified organic seeds for the tropical region, my tree selections are now based solely on salt tolerance, drought tolerance, and ability to handle wind, and genetic preservation. My tree selections and prunings are now focused on dwarf varieties. I'm also focusing on native fruit trees that can survive better in our environment. I am currently looking through what USDA programs will help me adapt my farming techniques to more climate resilient strategies. We are working hard to figure out ways to build water capacity for the coming dryer years.

In the USVI, we share many of the USDA's mission of increasing food production, sustainable natural resource stewardship, ending hunger, improving our country's health, and its commitment to helping improve the economy and quality of life in all of rural America. I believe the USDA is the most poised government agency to affect the greatest possible change in the quality of life in our country. We ask that you include the USVI and other insular territories in more of your economic research studies going forward. It will help our community and the nation. Dr Olive often says the islands are a microcosm scale of national issues. He's right. If included in more national studies, I believe it can hold many of the solutions to other small American rural community living life on the edge between food security or food desert.

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I would like to thank the Subcommittee for giving me the opportunity to testify before you today on the research needs of organic growers like us in small outlying American communities who are on the frontlines of environmental and market changes. And thank you to all of the hardworking people within the Ag Committee, subcommittees, USDA and all of its agencies. I am happy to answer any questions you may have.

-Shelli Brin