

# Minority Mentoring: A Cooperative Model for Restoring Food Security to the Virgin Islands

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## Abstract

*St. Croix in the, US Virgin Islands, has a rich heritage of farming. However, a number of social, cultural, and legislative factors have led to the demise of farming on the island, making its residents dangerously dependent on imported food. Between 1760 and the mid-1960's, the Virgin Islands produced most of the food it consumed and St. Croix Island was know as the "Breadbasket of the Caribbean." Today, however, local food production accounts for less than one percent of local food consumption<sup>1</sup>, large tracts of high-quality farmland are essentially idle, and small "hobby" gardens supply what little locally grown produce is available. Last year, St. Croix's only remaining fresh milk dairy closed its doors. The dairy and its associated milk/juice packaging facility accounted for 43 jobs, \$3.5 million in annual local sales, and the majority of all fresh farm products sales in the Virgin Islands. The dairy's closure idled 450 acres of productive farmland on St. Croix, increasing the pool of farmland that is under an escalating threat of non-agricultural development.*

*With the recent formation of the Virgin Islands Farmers Cooperative (VIFC)<sup>2</sup>, a minority farmer's cooperative based on the island of St. Croix, there is opportunity for the revival of agriculture on the island. The cooperative has been awarded a technical assistance grant for the development of a feasibility study and business plan for sustainable and organic dairy, livestock, and produce production on the island of St. Croix. In addition, the Virgin Islands Department of Agriculture has dedicated two plots of land to the cooperative, and the University of the Virgin Islands, including the Cooperative Extension Service, is committed to the support of this venture. In October 2006, the Coop was awarded \$200,000 by the USDA in the form of a Small Minority Producer Grant.*

*The goal of the Virgin Island Farmers Cooperative is to reverse the 42-year decline of local agricultural production in the Virgin Islands. The grant funds will be used to carry out the following activities:*

- conducting a market study of local and export markets potential for locally grown agricultural commodities;*
- identifying the most profitable mix of high-value crops (livestock, produce, fruits, flowers etc.) to produce and quantify the start-up capital, personnel, training, and infrastructure requirements;*
- developing an integrated 1, 3 and 5 year business and marketing plans for the cooperative's acquisition and operation of 1,000 acres of farmland;*
- providing a series of training workshop to improve farmers' skills and foster public education of job skills, nutrition and personnel finance; and*
- providing training for the VIFC board and members in cooperative development and management.*

*The deliverables of the proposed feasibility study will allow VIFC to forge the public and private partnerships needed to secure the capital for successfully launching this project and paving the way for a rebirth of a viable agriculture industry in the US Virgin Islands and on St. Croix in particular. In addition, VIFC has partnered with CROPP Cooperative, based in Wisconsin, USA, which will provide technical assistance, board training, systems development and mentoring to the newly formed cooperative.*

*CROPP Cooperative (Cooperative Regions of Organic Producer Pools) markets under the Organic Valley Family of Farms label.<sup>3</sup> Independent and farmer-owned, Organic Valley is America's largest cooperative of organic farmers, and is one of the nation's leading organic brands.<sup>4</sup> Organized in 1988, it represents 922 farmers in 28 states and 1 Canadian province, and achieved \$355 million in 2006 sales. Focused on its founding mission of keeping small and mid-sized farmers farming, the cooperative produces over 200 organic foods, including organic milk, soy, cheese, butter, spreads, creams, eggs, fruit, produce, and juice, which are sold in supermarkets, natural foods stores, and food cooperatives nationwide. The same farmers who produce Organic Valley also produce a full range of organic meat under the Organic Prairie<sup>5</sup> label*

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<sup>1</sup> 1998 Virgin Islands Agricultural Census

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.vifarmerscoop.org/index.php>

<sup>3</sup> [www.organicvalley.coop](http://www.organicvalley.coop)

<sup>4</sup> [www.farmers.coop](http://www.farmers.coop)

<sup>5</sup> [www.organicprairie.com](http://www.organicprairie.com)

*CROPP's collective experience over its 19-year history will be of significant value to the Virgin Island Farmers Cooperative as they start up. There is a wealth of production, marketing, manufacturing, sales, and management experience for the VIFC to draw upon. Market potential for locally produced, sustainably grown farm products is substantial. As the VIFC matures, production practices will progress from sustainable to certified organic production. VIFC members include a dedicated core group of organic and conventional farmers, who will serve as planners and mentors to the 60 members anxious to return to an agrarian lifestyle.*

*The VIFC Marketing Plan will follow a multifaceted, grassroots relationship strategy. The cooperative will develop and promote their own brand in order to distinguish themselves from commercially produced imported product. In addition to supplying their branded, locally produced food into established distribution channels to restaurant and supermarkets on St. Croix and St. Thomas, the cooperative will strengthen their presence with consumers through a variety of direct marketing initiatives:*

- farmers markets and a roadside stand;*
- community Supported Agriculture (Box Scheme) program for residents and boat owning transients; and*
- u-pick facilities and an agri-tourism complex at the site of the former dairy facility, including tours, biking and hiking trails, restaurant and banquet facilities, demonstration and test farm plots, and camping/internship opportunities.*

*An essential cooperative function will be to support the local community with fresh food as well as employment and educational opportunities. The cooperative will target the local population for employment. Surplus produce will be put into the hands of those who need it through food pantries, schools, churches, and other benevolent organizations. Classes are planned to teach gardening techniques, nutrition, personal finance, and employment skills.*

*With the development of the Virgin Island Farmers Cooperative comes a singular opportunity to revitalize agriculture in the US Virgin Islands. By doing so, the indigenous residents stand to significantly profit by supplying fresher produce to restaurants and institutions, improve the quality of food they consume themselves, regain a substantial measure of food security, and preserve their unique rural community and heritage. The members of the cooperative have shown admirable determination and steadfast dedication toward their goal of reestablishing local agricultural production.*