State and Private Forestry Fact Sheet
Virgin Islands 2023

Investment in State's Cooperative Programs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Program</th>
<th>FY 2022 Final</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Community Forestry and Open Space</td>
<td>$0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cooperative Lands - Forest Health Management</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forest Legacy</td>
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<tr>
<td>Forest Stewardship</td>
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<tr>
<td>Landscape Scale Restoration</td>
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<tr>
<td>State Fire Assistance</td>
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<tr>
<td>Urban and Community Forestry</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Volunteer Fire Assistance</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>$341,856</strong></td>
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</tbody>
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NOTE: This funding is for all entities within the state, not just the State Forester's office.

The United States Virgin Islands (USVI) consists of three major islands, St. Croix, St. John, and St. Thomas, which includes nearby Water Island and many smaller islands and cays. Each island has its own unique ecological, historical, and cultural heritage reflected in the present state of each island's forest resources. St. Croix is traditionally the agricultural island of the US Virgin Islands; it is the largest island at 84 square miles and possesses most of the flat land in the US VI. St. Thomas, at 32 square miles, is traditionally the trading center of the U.S. Virgin Islands, as it has a deep-water port; tourism is the largest employer on this island. St. John, at 20 square miles, is the eco-tourism island, with nearly two-thirds of St. John's area preserved inside the boundaries of the Virgin Islands National Park.

Many of the issues and challenges facing the USVI are similar to those facing other Caribbean islands and nations. There is an increasing demand for development of seemingly "vacant" land, with a concurrent need for economic growth and creation of jobs (USVI, 2006). Development in the form of hotels, golf courses, condominiums, and other "improvements" puts stress on the remaining forested land. Loss of forested landscapes to development, the stress this places on watersheds is a critical problem on all small islands in the Caribbean, and the USVI is no exception. The forested slopes provide areas for water infiltration and help prevent soil erosion. Development on steep slopes leads to soil erosion, causing damage to the watershed, and to offshore coral reefs and the local fisheries they support, as well as to tourism (Beller et al., 1990).

Program Goals

- Contiguous Forest Conservation and Management- Contiguous forests in the USVI tend to be large patches of forest that are close, but not always adjacent, to other forest patches. Management of these large patches of forest consists of conservation of the existing forest and the protection of areas that provide access to these patches.

- Urban Forest Management- Urban and community forests account for a large percentage of the US Virgin Islands' forests. They play a unique role in the health and well being of humans in the urban environment by absorbing pollutants, cooling the air, dampening noise pollution and reducing erosion. Urban forests also provide an opportunity for people living in an urban environment to form connections with and an appreciation of nature, an essential component for any conservation program.

- Coastal Forest Ecosystem Protection- Tropical islands rely on coastal forest ecosystems for many important ecosystem services. Mangroves are the backbone of coastal forest ecosystems, and their contributions. They provide essential habitat for a wide range of wildlife, including nursery habitat for economically important juvenile fish. Many birds nest in the mangroves and rely on the fish and invertebrates in the surrounding water for food. Coastal areas could focus of development activities.
Key Issues

- **CONTIGUOUS FOREST LOSS** - In the U.S. Virgin Islands, contiguous forest areas are necessary for many reasons, including watershed protection, increased infiltration rates, and surface temperature. These areas also provide beneficial habitat for local species, such as several species of bats, the only native mammals. Contiguous or mostly contiguous forest cover provides the connection for these beneficial ecological functions to take place.

- **LOSS OF TRANSITIONAL FORESTS TO DEVELOPMENT** - Forests in transition are changing from and to forest lands. Usually, transitional forests are found in agricultural land, such as pasture, or areas that were once cleared for development that have been left undeveloped. Secondary forests that establish themselves in these areas provide habitat for wildlife and an opportunity for native forest flora to reestablish itself.

- **URBAN FOREST SUSTAINABILITY** - Urban and community forests are estimated to account for 48% of St. Croix’s forests, 60% of St. Thomas forests and 7% of St. John’s forests (according to different allowable building densities). Lack of data for urban and community forests have hindered the ability of land managers to measure the value of these abundant resources that provide many natural and cultural benefits to the people of the Virgin Islands.

- **HAZARD MITIGATION** - While natural events such as hurricanes are not preventable, good forestry management practices can help prepare urban trees and rural forests for such storms. Selecting tree species for planting that are less susceptible to breakage, using pruning practices that result in stronger trunks and branches, and promoting cultural practices that encourage strong root systems are all ways to grow a storm-resistant forest.

- **WATER MANAGEMENT** - The two primary issues of water management in the US Virgin Islands are the provision of freshwater for drinking and agriculture, and the management of storm water. Both problems are intertwined. The USVI suffers from periodic droughts or dealing with excessive amounts of storm water produced by serious rainfall events like tropical storms and hurricanes. These have been historical problems. Only now, they are aggravated by climate change.

- **DEGRADATION OF COASTAL FOREST ECOSYSTEMS** - Coastal forest ecosystems are the ecotone between terrestrial and marine landscapes. They include coastal dry scrub with rare and endemic species, forested wetlands, and mangroves. Mangrove communities can be classified as forest, woodland, scrub or fringing, depending on height and density.

- **INVASIVE SPECIES** - There are many "naturalized" species in the US Virgin Islands including the flamboyant tree (Madagascar), the tibit tree (India), and the neem tree (India). In extremely rare instances, the newly introduced species behaves differently than it does in its native habitat and grows, reproduces and spreads very aggressively. When this aggressive behavior becomes harmful to the environment or the local economy the species can be designated as invasive.

- **WILDFIRES** - In the Caribbean, unintended fires are thought to be a major source of deforestation. The Virgin Islands' forests are not fire-dependent but rather fire-sensitive, meaning they are not ecologically adapted to periodic fires. This is not surprising as fires rarely occur naturally in the USVI; instead, the majority are a result of human activity.

Forest Facts and Accomplishments
Selected Facts | Value
---|---
Population | 87,146
Acres of Forest Land | 46,967
Acres of Nonindustrial Private Forest Land | 54,990
Number of NIPF Landowners | 565
Acres of Federal Land Under State Fire Protection | 7,500
Acres of Private Land Under State Fire Protection | 13,824
Number of Rural Fire Departments | 1
Cities and Towns | 3
Forest Based Employment | 125
Economic Impact of Forestry (by rank) | 5
State Forestry Budget (All Sources) | 180,500

FY 2022 Accomplishments | Value
---|---
Landowners Receiving Educational or Technical Assistance | 56
Acres Covered by New or Revised Forest Stewardship Plans | 0
Acres in Important Forest Resource Areas Covered by New or Revised Stewardship Plans | 0
Volunteer Fire Departments Assisted | 0
State Fire Communities Assisted | 0
Coop Forest Health Acres Protected | 0
Forest Legacy Project Acquisitions | 0
Communities Provided Urban Forestry Program Assistance | 0
Population Living in Communities Provided Urban Forestry Program Assistance | 0
Urban Forestry Volunteer Assistance | 1,103

Program Highlights

**Best Forest Management Practices Conversation**
The University of Puerto Rico in Mayaguez, College of Agriculture and the IITF State and Private Forestry unit hosted the activity Best Forest Management Practices Conversation in Christiansted, St. Croix, on July 26, 2022. In this event, professor Dr. Oscar Abelleira presented his and his student's forestry work in Puerto Rico with an interest in learning more about forest management needs in the US Virgin Islands. The presentation served as the basis for a robust conversation with participants about the state of US Virgin Islands forests and forest management practices and needs specific to the Virgin Islands.

**Cooperative Fire Protection**
The make-up of the US Virgin Islands is unique in that the Territory consists of three major islands and a smaller inhabited island, each of which requires its own fire stations. The Virgin Islands Fire Service is divided into two districts: the St. Thomas/St. John/Water Island district and the St. Croix district. There are seven fire stations in the St. Thomas/St. John/Water Island district and four in the St. Croix district. All stations are open 24 hours a day, seven days a week. The agency has three main areas of operations: Emergency Operations (Suppression), Arson Investigation and Prevention (Prevention), and Administration. There are seven fire stations in the St. Thomas/St. John/Water Island district and four in the St. Croix district The VI Fire Service (VIFS) provides service to over 108,000 year-round residents and additional seasonal vacationers of 10,000 to 15,000. During Fiscal Year 2022, the wildland firefighters responded to 17 wildland fires that affected over 5 acres of land throughout the territory. The USVI Fire Department acquired two portable floating pumps to increase capability to have water available for wildland fire suppression in areas where no regular pumps are available.

The Prevention Unit of the Fire Service conducted yearlong fire education workshops, performed fire extinguisher training and fire drills. This Unit conducted a series of educational activities that reached 785 students. The goal of the Prevention Unit is to safeguard the community from fires and other related hazards through programs which will educate the public and enhance observance to fire regulations. The Administration Unit, through management of the available financial resources, provides the support for efficient operations of these two units. USDA Forest Service grant funds were used to purchase firefighting gears, firefighting supplies, educational supplies, and other items educational tools that were distributed to the students during Prevention Week.

**Forest Legacy**
During Fiscal Year 2022, the Virgin Islands Department of Agriculture, VIDA, conducted annual monitoring of properties acquired with funds from the Forest Legacy Program.
In July 2022, VIDA conducted additional visits in conjunction with staff from the International Institute of Tropical Forestry during their annual program visit to the Virgin Islands.

VIDA is actively recruiting a Coordinator for the Forest Legacy Program.

**Forest Stewardship**

During Fiscal Year 2022, the Virgin Islands Department of Agriculture (VIDA) conducted site visits to properties with a Forest Stewardship Program Management Plan.

In July VIDA conducted additional visits in conjunction with staff from the International Institute of Tropical Forestry during their annual program visit to the Virgin Islands.

VIDA is actively recruiting a Coordinator for the Forest Stewardship Program.

**Urban and Community Forestry**

The Urban & Community Forestry office of the US Virgin organized and facilitated UCF Council meetings. The council is committed to supporting the implementation of the UCF Assistance Program. This ultimately will lead to the development of a UCF policy, guidance for planning programs, the delivery of technical assistance, and the establishment of a territorial network of organizations of community grassroots support for the proliferation of a healthy Urban Forestry in the Virgin Islands. The UCF office at the US Virgin Islands Department of Agriculture also assisted in the preparation of the US Virgin Islands Forest Action Plan. The office provided technical assistance on tree management and processed over 25 permits for private concerns, NGOs and Gov't agencies, and private landowners.

The UCF Coordinator participated in several important meetings and training sessions that resulted in improvement of his technical capacity and delivery of technical information to the communities he serves. He participated of the Forest Management Best Practices conference sponsored by IITF and VIDA in collaboration with the University of Puerto Rico, College of Agriculture. UCF Coordinator is member of the US Virgin Islands Forest Working Group to facilitate the promotion and development of the UCF Program in the islands and encourage the preparation of urban forestry management plans.

A delegation from the USVI attended the Partners in Community Forestry Conference in November 2022. The conference provided valuable information to the Virgin Islands on upcoming legislation, information on funding, and forestry management practices. The important networking was valuable, to our UCF Coordinator and the Forestry Council, in providing contacts to a wide range of qualified like-minded individuals who are willing to assist and contribute to the progress of the Virgin Islands forestry endeavors.

**US Virgin Islands Forestry Working Group**

The Virgin Islands Department of Agriculture with the support of the IITF State and Private Forestry Unit, coordinated the first interagency meeting of the US Virgin Islands Forestry Working Group. After the State and Private Forestry Team visit to St. Croix in July, partners in the US Virgin Islands were interested in continuing conversations related to forestry in the islands. On August 25, we organized the first meeting of a working group to serve as forum to explore forestry related topics, needs and challenges, and collaborations in the US Virgin Islands.

**Virgin Islands Department of Agriculture AgriScience Career Fair**

The Virgin Islands Department of Agriculture hosted the first AgriScience Career Fair on July 26, 2022. Local elementary and high school students participated in the event, learning about agriculture, National Parks, NRCS and Forestry careers. During the event students had the opportunity to tour the VIDA tree nursery that was rebuilt with US Forest Service Hurricane Recovery funds. VUDA Urban and Community Forestry Program unit provided a display providing students with tree planting information and the importance of the conservation, protection, and management of the urban forests and the environment.
Contact Information

Virgin Islands Department of Agriculture

Positive TA Nelson  
Commissioner  
RR1, Box 10345  
Kingshill, VI 00850  
340-778-0991  
positive.nelson@doa.vi.gov

US Forest Service

International Institute of Tropical Forestry

Magaly Figueroa Vazquez  
State and Private Forestry Programs  
USDA Forest Service  
Jardin Botanico Sur, 1201 Calle Ceiba  
San Juan, PR 00926-1119  
787-764-7718  
magaly.figueroa@usda.gov