

The 'Virgin Fresh' apicultural project: development and expansion of the U.S. Virgin Islands apiculture industry

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The Virgin Fresh Apicultural Project, sponsored by the Virgin Islands Department of Agriculture and the University of the Virgin Islands Cooperative Extension Service, explored the production and market potential of apicultural products. These commodities are usually available from local beekeepers, but there was no organized system to increase their supply and market them as packaged, specialty items to the hospitality industry and local markets. Agriculture professionals, farmers and interested residents participated in Beekeeping classes designed to create a group of entrepreneurs to develop and expand the local apiculture industry. The topics included in a series of twelve-week training classes were: basic first aid; safety in and around the hive; tools of the trade; hive management; business planning and marketing; and bee biology and diseases. Over one hundred persons completed the training classes. The Virgin Fresh Apicultural Project increased the number of ecologically-sustainable and economically-profitable apicultural businesses in the U.S. Virgin Islands. This project established a model system for the production, harvesting, and marketing processes required to create and maintain sustainable, profitable, apicultural businesses and to stimulate growth of the local apicultural industry. The increased beekeeping activity has allowed the implementation of a marketing campaign highlighting apicultural products, the most popular of which is honey. The campaign consists of branding the locally produced honey with the 'Virgin Fresh' seal to differentiate it from imported honey. The project has increased the public's awareness of locally produced apicultural products and is creating a source of alternative, agricultural, entrepreneurial ventures to stimulate economic development.

Palabras Claves/Key Words:: Apiculture, beekeeping, *Apis mellifera*, honey, hive management, bees