

Advancing Animal Disease Traceability (ADT) Road Map for US Virgin Islands

A Three-Year Plan

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I. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Virgin Islands is a small US territory located in the eastern Caribbean. It is made up of three islands St. Croix, St. John, and St. Thomas. St. Croix is a rural area of rolling hills with a long history of agriculture. St. Thomas and St. John have steep terrain and an economy based on tourism, and a lesser but present agriculture sector.

The population of the Virgin Islands is widely diverse with people from throughout the Caribbean and the United States mainland, as well Europe and the Middle East. The territory is a border of the United States.

The Virgin Islands Department of Agriculture (VIDA) is mandated to protect the public health and food supply by providing veterinary services to livestock, regulating imported and exported animals, and educating farmers. The small division of Veterinary Services (VIDA VS) has oversight of livestock, horses, and poultry health and welfare, as well as regulatory issues involving all animals.

These small islands include intricate networks of farmers and animal owners who are connected by family and geography. Local knowledge of farms, animal owners, and stakeholders is an integral part of our day's work. The Animal Disease Traceability program has greatly assisted with the building and maintenance of a livestock and farmer database through supportive funding and expert personnel from USDA. VIDA VS is the primary supplier and implementor of animal identification and registration in the Territory, and this necessitates regular travel between islands of our small staff via plane.

Federal animal health programs, including the ADT CA, have supplied much of the cost of RFID tags and microchips, as well as assisting in technology improvements to expedite information transfer. Cost of visual tags is largely covered by VIDA budget. All livestock and horses entering or leaving the territory of the USVI are regulated by VIDA, including RFID tagging, microchipping, and import permits.

Timeline for proposed plan:

Year 1:

- Establish eCVI account with GlobalVetLink for export of livestock/poultry
- Purchase new computer system to upgrade from the currently outdated hardware
- Continue efforts to educate animal owners on the need for official identification and registry of all animals
- Continue to build collaborations with other government agencies, both federal and territory, to establish regulation of current USVI laws on animal identification and disease regulation, including:
 - o Customs and Border Patrol
 - o US Postal Service
 - o VI Police Department

- Continue tagging and microchipping of livestock on all 3 islands
- Year 2:
- Achieve 100% eCVI usage for livestock export
 - Encourage local veterinary practitioners to move to eCVI usage
 - Continue efforts to educate animal owners on the need for official identification and registry of all animals
 - Maintain inter-agency collaborations
 - Continue tagging and microchipping of livestock on all 3 islands
- Year 3:
- Achieve 100% eCVI usage for all animal exports
 - Continue efforts to educate animal owners on the need for official identification and registry of all animals
 - Maintain inter-agency collaborations
 - Continue tagging and microchipping of livestock on all 3 islands

Projected costs for effecting the proposed changes in the timeline, as well as maintaining current efforts in tagging and registration, would be no less than the current financial allotment of \$14,504.00.

Benefits of accomplishing the proposed goals would be alignment of our territory traceability with the USDA's ADT goals.

II. CURRENT TRACEABILITY SITUATION

2.1 Who are we?

VIDA VS (staff of 4) provides veterinary services to all farmers, regulates import/exports, and responds to stray animal reports. We examine over 800 animals every month including pigs, sheep, goats, cattle, horses, and poultry. Regular farm visits are scheduled daily and include tagging, registration of animals and farms, tick spraying services, and veterinary medical services. We also implement federal animal health programs such as avian health surveillance, traceability, and African Swine Fever Surveillance and Tropical Bont Tick Eradication with support from USDA.

Our efforts are dictated by VI Code but are also motivated by our values of maintaining animal health and well-being by limiting disease spread. This is accomplished by educating animal owners and public entities on health and regulatory issues and maintaining the ability to trace individual animals to their source farms.

The advisory group consists of the Director of Veterinary Services (SAHO) and the AVIC, with nearly daily communication existing.

2.2 Where are we now?

Farm premises information is held in the Access database and is available 24/7 by authorized VIDA VS staff, and individual animal information can be made available upon request to partnering agencies. This database is currently sufficient to hold the individual IDs and farm information for the entire territory. Access to the database is limited only by power outages, which are frequent, and in lieu of such lists of farmers and horse owners as well as horse identification information are printed out twice a year and kept in each of the VIDA VS vehicles.

VIDA VS currently serves nearly 480 animal owners and premises. 85% of these farm premises have been identified and registered. The information collected includes owner contact information, species on the premises, tagged animals, geophysical coordinates, and physical location. This information is continually being collected by VIDA VS and submitted to EMRS specialists when applicable.

VIDA educates farmers and horse owners and poultry owners on animal health and management issues. We work with the ubiquitous game bird populations to educate, to improve biosecurity, and to register all poultry premises.

With the discovery of Tropical Bont Ticks on a farm in April 2021, VIDA has sought support from USDA in performing surveillance on the 55 premises and 2,000 livestock and horses following a treatment plan with various modalities.

With the diagnosis of African Swine Fever in the Dominican Republic and Haiti in August 2021, USVI has been designated a Protection Zone. This designation has created a robust swine farm surveillance program of all 33 swine premises throughout the Territory with major support from USDA.

These two surveillance programs have generated much appreciated support in updating and improving USVI farm premises data in EMRS and maintaining current tagging and registration of animals and premises.

Feed shops, veterinarians, abattoirs, racetracks, and animal exhibit areas have all been identified. There are no livestock markets in the Virgin Islands.

The avian health surveillance program also ensures compliance with enhancing traceability each year. At each surveillance visit, premises information is updated. Most of the poultry premises are backyard gamebirds.

Per VI Code, VIDA VS is responsible for tagging and registration and is the only official tagging station in the USVI. Owners do not tag their own animals generally and there are no active livestock groups or markets in the territory who provide this service. Local veterinarians are not involved with livestock.

2.3 Strengths and Weaknesses

VIDA VS is dependent on and benefits significantly from its staff who have personal and trusting relationships with the farmers, horse owners, and poultry owners in the territory. Outreach in an ever-changing environment to animal owners to update information and register premises is continuous. The small, dedicated staff is a significant strength in that information is not lost between personnel as might occur in larger organizations.

The major problem facing VIDA is the lack of VS staff in the St. Thomas district. There are no veterinarians or staff specifically assigned to veterinary services. It is very difficult to maintain the tagging of animals and registration of farms and premises, and therefore tagging of animals is not done as completely as needed. Additional travel by VIDA VS staff to the St. Thomas district is required to resolve this issue.

Providing uniform services on each island is difficult. Resources, supplies and equipment must often be duplicated for each island. Lack of staff and other resources hampers ability of VIDA VS to complete tasks in St. Thomas/St. John district.

The VI Government administrative system poses *major* challenges to purchasing equipment and travel, often causing missed deadlines on fiscal programs.

Lack of infrastructure on farms increases the difficulty of handling and treating animals, and is unsafe for staff and animals.

The transient nature of horse ownership and movement in the territory increases the difficulty of maintaining an assigned premise to any particular horse.

2.4 Opportunities and Threats

With an increased reliance upon electronic data processing and transfer, there is the opportunity to upgrade computer technology/hardware in VIDA to enable greater capability. However, such reliance upon electronics also creates a vulnerability via power outages, which are frequent and can be prolonged (months) following a hurricane.

Much human and animal traffic occurs daily throughout the USVI and Caribbean region. Introduction of a disease or pest is a potential problem. Smuggling of animals through charter flights and boats is a constant threat. VIDA VS works with Customs and Border Protection to decrease these threats.

Hurricanes are the most serious natural disaster threat to USVI. There is little support or assistance locally for livestock farmers or horse owners in preparing for disasters. There are no CARTS and no attention is paid to animal welfare or health risks in the three major animal populations: livestock, horses and companion animals. There are no livestock associations or farm bureaus to assist farmers. This is a major gap in disaster preparedness and recovery; however VIDA VS data can significantly help return livestock to owners.

Stray horses are a constant problem in the Territory and are the cause of about 6 car accidents a year. The current traceability program greatly assists VIDA VS in identifying those animals and owners involved.

If this plan is not implemented, significant potential for disease spread or introduction will exist, as well as numerous opportunities for animals to be lost or injured. There are no other groups within the VI government assigned to such tasks.

2.5 Inventory of existing infrastructure and suitability assessment

VIDA VS is a small four-person team, 3 located on the island of St. Croix and 1 on the island of St. Thomas. VIDA VS provides veterinary services daily to farmers and is responsible for tagging animals, impounding stray animals to protect motorists and for regulating all imported animals as well as acting as the lead in all farmer and livestock and horse issues.

The database is the central component of VIDA VS and the implementation of traceability. Paper copies of premise IDs and individual horse microchips is printed twice a year and kept in each vehicle.

Currently, all importing CVIs, including eCVIs, are printed and maintained in a filing system with hard copies.

With support from USDA through the Bont Tick Eradication Program and African Swine Fever Surveillance, the daily information collected by VIDA VS is kept current in EMRS. We have about 85% of the VI farms completed.

The database is continually being updated with new animal information as well as new farm information. Storage of the database is held in an external hard drive. The data is backed up daily. Information is available during work hours and may be accessed by two of the VIDA VS staff if needed anytime.

III. VISION AND MISSION CONTEXT FOR ADVANCING TRACEABILITY

3.1 Vision Statement

VIDA VS recognizes the importance of enhancing traceability as an element of protecting animal health and will continue toward the goal of identifying and mapping all livestock, horse farms, and premises in the USVI.

3.2 Mission Statement

To continue to enhance traceability in the USVI with the support and understanding of the farmers and agriculture stakeholders.

IV. TRACEABILITY REQUIREMENTS

4.1 Strategic goal(s)

The goal is to identify all farms/premises and animals and maintain an active and accessible database.

4.2 Programmatic goals (objectives)

Horses are microchipped with AVID microchips as required by Virgin Islands law and registered in the VIDA VS database. Transfer of ownership is done through VIDA VS to be legally recognized.

Cattle, sheep, and goats are tagged as required by law by owner request or by VIDA VS request

All exported animals are identified with official RFID 840 tags.

All cattle are identified with official RFID 840 tags.

All tag and microchip numbers are submitted to the database daily.

New farms and animals are identified and added to the database and submitted to EMRS specialist for a PIN.

Individual inspection of all ICVIs by VIDA VS staff.

Educate farmers, horse, and poultry owners to register their farms and animals with VIDA.

Assess existing policy through daily experience and evolve existing policy or develop new policy as needed.

4.3 ADT Trace Performance Measures (TPMs)

Number of farms and premises identified (percentage of whole).

Number of animals identified (percentage of whole).

Number of farms and premises with GPS information and PINs (percentage of whole).

Quarterly reports to USDA per ADT CA requirements.

Number of animals imported and CVIs received. VIDA VS will continue to report all CVI information by species and official RFID tags distributed, as needed.

The very limited number of livestock exports from the USVI will continue to be recorded and shared with the state of destination. Most exports are horses or poultry, with a very rare (<1 per year) export of cattle, sheep, goats, or swine.

Traceability exercises and resulting performance measures cannot be completed because of the actual situation that USVI does not import or export cattle.

4.4 Data requirements

VIDA VS updates, maintains, and stores information within the Access database. Data is shared with partnering agencies as needed.

USVI information is regularly updated in EMRS as part of the Bont Tick Eradication Program and African Swine Fever Surveillance Program.

Advancing traceability is enhanced daily with farm visits and tagging and registration. VIDA VS tags and microchips livestock and horses in the VI. All tags are secured in the VIDA VS office. VIDA VS is the only official tagging station.

Official RFID tags are used for cattle and any export animals, and are only used by VIDA VS.

The one abattoir in St. Croix is managed by VIDA and abattoir staff record all animals entering the facility.

There are no livestock markets or associations in the VI.

All imported livestock have import permits and are registered and cleared by VIDA VS through the airports and marine ports. Horses are most common animal imported.

Horses are occasionally exported to the US under 9 CFR 72 regulations for the cattle fever tick.

Farms and premises are given a local identification number by VIDA VS, as well as assigned a PIN for EMRS data entry by USDA personnel.

Information of farms includes owners, physical location, and species present, and identified animals.

Only ICVIs are permitted for animal importation purposes.

Paper export ICVIs are currently emailed within 2 business days.

4.5 Information technology plan

VIDA will purchase new computers in year 1 of this plan with ADT CA funding. An account will be established with GlobalVetLink to enable meeting the goal of 100% eCVI usage by VIDA, which would include all livestock exports. Education of VIDA staff and local veterinarians will enable the ultimate goal of 100% eCVI usage throughout the USVI.

4.6 Resource requirements

Support of the EMRS specialist, currently the USDA AHT for the USVI, through the federal programs is essential to advancing traceability. VIDA VS does not have an IT person or have the staff or expertise to work in EMRS.

With such a small staff, a COOP is not in place as continuity is ensured through both redundancy within VIDA VS as well as overlapping training between outgoing and incoming employees.

4.7 Organizational needs

No need for an organizational change is required.

4.7.1 Executive support

No additional support from executive management is needed, other than lobbying for additional VIDA VS staff.

Accountability is accomplished through the successful daily data entry into our data system and retrieval of information for our various activities around the territory.

No performance oversight is necessary.

4.7.2 Coordination and oversight procedures

The advisory group consists of the Director of Veterinary Services (SAHO) and the AVIC, with nearly daily communication existing. All decision making for ADT programs originates with the Director of Veterinary Services (SAHO) and is approved by the Commissioner of the Department of Agriculture, as needed.

Retrieval of information is available 24/7 by authorized VIDA VS staff. VIDA VS shares information with stakeholders as needed and applicable by law.

Disputes are arbitrated by the Director of Veterinary Services (SAHO) with deference to the Commissioner of the Department of Agriculture should interpretation of law be necessary.

VITEMA is the local territorial emergency management agency. Preparations and response to past hurricane disasters has been insufficient and more work needs to be done in cooperation with that group. Assistance is needed from FEMA and USDA to support local networking between emergency responders. VIDA has been marginally effective in forming local coordination.

VIDA VS provides outreach and training for farmers and animal owners. Any livestock issue involves VIDA VS at some level. The daily farm visits are our most effective outreach tool. At that time, farmers have time to discuss issues with the veterinary staff.

VIDA VS displays ADT related information at the two local agriculture fairs and through social media and news releases.

Feed stores and veterinarians are aware of VIDA programs and VI Code laws and regulations through letters, posters, news releases, and personal contact.

VIDA VS is the only entity that tags livestock and microchips horses and regulates imports and exports.

VIDA VS works with the one abattoir (also under VIDA) to educate staff to biosecurity, disease risks, and traceability. The abattoir shares information with VIDA VS.

Transition has largely accomplished through assistance from USDA personnel, including the AVIC and EMRS specialist. Also, internal memos and files, and redundancy knowledge within VIDA VS, allow program information to be passed on to the new administrator.

4.7.3 Policy

VI Code requires identification and record of all livestock over 2 months old, with excellent alignment with ADT goals.

4.7.4 Staffing

In addition to the single USDA AHT located in our office, VIDA VS staff consists of:

- Director and SAHO (1)
- Office manager/Field technician (1)
- Field technicians (2)

There is significant overlap of responsibilities between positions within VIDA VS and, when needed, the entire team will gather on 1 island. In the event of an emergency FADD, VI Police Department personnel can be utilized in the short term, and USDA VS personnel would be requested.

4.7.5 Budget requirements

Additional funding is not needed. See the ADT Work and Financial plan for more information.

4.7.6 Outreach (required to be addressed within the Road Map)

Outreach is accomplished through information sharing as needed via weekly VIDA radio shows, online webpages, Facebook page, and direct communication between stakeholders and VIDA VS personnel. VIDA VS also has a booth at the annual AgFest fair for distribution of information via flyers and posters, as well as direct communication with VIDA VS personnel.

4.7.6.1 Accredited veterinarians

Communication with accredited veterinarians occurs via group and individual email as needed for regulatory issues. Given that there are <8 accredited veterinarians practicing in the territory, direct communication is easily accomplished.

4.7.6.2 Slaughter plants

The abattoir maintains records of all animals killed in the abattoir. The abattoir is run by VIDA and is physically near the VIDA VS office, so there is frequent information exchange.

4.7.6.3 Industry as a whole

This is a small island community. VIDA VS regularly and routinely works with all livestock farmers.

4.8 Monitoring and reporting interstate movement activity

All livestock and poultry, except for day-old chicks from NPIP hatcheries, required import permits. All export health certificates for livestock and poultry are performed by VIDA VS (>90%) or copies are emailed and on record at VIDA VS (<10%). All companion animals must have a health certificate sent to the VIDA VS office prior to their arrival in the USVI.

All data is reported as needed in ADT quarterly reports.

V. ADVANCING TRACEABILITY

5.1 Ranking of priorities for advancement

Movement toward 100% eCVI usage in the territory. Phase in approach.

Assigning PINs. Continual effort.

Tagging animals

VIDA VS schedules farm visits as owners request them. VIDA VS will contact livestock owners bi-annually if needed to tag animals. Tagging of animals is mandated by VI Code. Farmers on government leased lands are required in their lease to tag animals. Animal owners are cooperative. The farm census for each farm visit is updated weekly.

Imports

VIDA VS issues permits for animal imports which enforces traceability implementation. Animals must arrive by boat or plane only.

Educating Industry

Stakeholders are largely educated through outreach by news releases from VIDA VS, farm visits, and participation in animal health surveillance programs and fair displays.

Funding for Implementation

The current funding is adequate with the VIDA VS staff available to continue traceability in the USVI.

5.2 Implementation of objectives

100% eCVI utilization

- Attain GVL account
- Direct contact with local, accredited practitioners who are not utilizing eCVIs.

Assigning PINs

- Continue gathering farm data as we perform our daily work on farms and entering into our database.
- Continued submission of information to EMRS specialists for support of federal animal health programs.

Tagging animals

- Schedule visits to St. Thomas/St. John district more frequently to tag animals.
- Continue with various public information tactics to communicate tagging requirements.
- Continue tagging animals as they are discovered to be untagged in our daily work.
- Contact farms on which we have not had regular visits to communicate the need.

Imports

- Continue updating the VIDA webpage and Facebook with our import requirements.
- Contact the many internet groups with “advice” on traveling with animals to the USVI and keep them current.

Education

- Continue with direct communication, online information dispersal, radio talk shows, and community AgFest information booth presence.