

Climate Resilience Regional Challenge

PROJECT SUMMARIES

CLIMATE RESILIENCE AND RISK REDUCTION IN THE U.S. VIRGIN ISLANDS

Project Lead: U.S. Virgin Islands Department of Planning and Natural Resources

Funding Amount: \$69,000,000

SUMMARY

By protecting important natural areas in the U.S. Virgin Islands, this project enhances water security, offers protection from flooding and drought, protects cultural and ecological resources, increases public access, and contributes to a climate-ready workforce. The project will build on local momentum that has been 40-plus years in the making.

Tasks will be accomplished via community-led projects and government-led initiatives, with three primary components: 1) acquiring four properties at risk from development; 2) creating a working group to guide the implementation of nature-based solutions; and 3) training area youth to provide increased local capacity for conducting restoration projects.

DETAILS

Creating Climate-Resilient Land Conservation and Park Development

With these funds, the acquisition of four naturally and culturally significant land parcels, located on each of the main islands, is underway. Each will become part of the new Territorial Park System for perpetual conservation. The Virgin Islands Department of Planning and Natural Resources is partnering with the Trust for Virgin Islands Lands and the Trust for Public Lands to facilitate these purchases.

Each property holds special significance for the region, and each is at risk from development. The benefits of these acquisitions are immense and wide ranging: recharged aquifers; increased ability to absorb atmospheric carbon, help offsetting extreme temperature events; increased natural habitat; improved water quality and erosion control; and increased recreational opportunities.

Implementing Watershed and Coastal Improvement Plans

This funding represents a far reaching investment in the region's long-term capacity for improving climate health, which is another important reason for the strong focus on regional collaboration and equity and inclusion. A big first step is the development of the U.S. Virgin Island's Water Working Group for Climate Resilience and Nature-based Solutions, whose activities will include frequent collaboration on water-



related projects; codevelopment of best in climate-resilient practices; architecture and engineering design considerations at small-island scale; and providing guidance, collaboration, and documentation of the progress and process of projects involving nature-based solutions.

Membership is targeted to all sectors of government and other organizations with relevant focus areas, including public works, ports, agriculture, emergency management, universities, and various existing regional collaborators such as the Southeast and Caribbean Disaster Resilience Partnership, Natural Resources Conservation Service, and the Caribbean Climate Adaptation Network.

Building Education and Workforce Development Opportunities

A U.S. Virgin Islands Climate Corp is on the way! The Crucian Heritage and Nature Tourism organization, with a proven track record in this arena, will develop this approach for training and employing local young adults (ages 18 to 30) to implement resilience-building projects.

Focus areas include mangrove restoration; sediment reduction; stormwater runoff management, development, and maintenance; coastal trail development; marine debris removal; and more. Participants will also implement projects in the soon-to-be established territorial parks. The current lineup includes mangrove restoration in Fish Bay, development of a food forest at Rust Op Twist, and coastal and wetland restoration and trail development and maintenance for each of the newly established parks.

The program will operate on St. Croix in 2025 and 2027, and in St. Thomas and St. John in 2026 and 2028. The end result is 12 to 20 young people on each island, trained in climate resilience skills, and spending approximately 50,000 to 75,000 labor hours implementing adaptation projects. Participants will be recruited, trained, and paid to implement these projects.

ABOUT THE CLIMATE RESILIENCE REGIONAL CHALLENGE

In 2022, Congress appropriated approximately \$575 million, through the *Inflation Reduction Act*, to be competitively awarded for projects that help coastal communities become more resilient as they face increasing threats from extreme weather and climate change. This historic, transformative effort is known as the *Climate Resilience Regional Challenge*.

To learn more about the program and the funded projects, visit the website.

coast.noaa.gov/funding/ira/resilience-challenge/

