

## **DPNR Seeks Emergency Budget Boost to Avoid Layoffs, Keep Libraries Open Amid Local Shortfalls and Targeted Federal Cuts**

**DPNR warned lawmakers that without nearly \$2 million in supplemental funds, layoffs and service cuts would hit the Permits and Libraries divisions hard; federal cuts and staffing shortages could shutter libraries and stall disaster recovery projects.**

Government / **Published On July 11, 2025 06:03 AM /**

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Budget hearings continued on Thursday, with the Department of Planning and Natural Resources defending its request before the Committee on Budget, Appropriations, and Finance. Despite having one of the largest budgets, DPNR is now counting on the Legislature to approve two supplemental budget requests to avoid a “crisis situation.”

DPNR's total request is \$146,949,100, per the testimony from its commissioner, Jean Pierre Oriol. The figure includes \$7,009,487 from the general fund, identical to last year's general fund request. The remainder of the budget is expected to come from \$10,861,427 from non-appropriated local funds, and \$129,078,186 in federal funds.

However, DPNR now needs an additional \$1,991,302 from the general fund to "address critical operational gaps." These challenges are concentrated in the Division of Libraries, Archives, and Museums and the Division of Permits. Without the supplemental budgets, Mr. Oriol warned that "employees will be laid off and services to the public will be further impacted."

For the Division of Permits, DPNR is requesting \$575,143, to fund 13 existing positions and fill vacancies for six months. According to Mr. Oriol, DPNR was granted a \$7 million supplemental award from the Federal Emergency Management Agency following the 2017 hurricanes. Initially due to expire in August 2025, the Department was granted an extension that will end in March 2026. "Without this supplemental funding, we will not be able to support all of the staff salaries," stated Mr. Oriol. Most of the staff in question are inspectors whose absence "would directly impact disaster recovery projects."

Senator Marvin Blyden was particularly concerned about the potential loss of inspectors, considering the upcoming surge in capital projects. "How do you plan to really get a hold of that division in particular so we can push forward in terms of a recovery?" he asked Mr. Oriol. For the DPNR commissioner, the only answer is "boots on the ground." The supplemental budget is how the Department plans to achieve that.

Next, DPNR is asking for \$1,416,159 for the Division of Libraries, Archives, and Museums. Oriol told lawmakers that the Division "cannot fully reopen or operate territory-wide without the appropriate staffing." The current budget ceiling, however, "does not allow for the retention and recruitment of the necessary workforce." Mr. Oriol cautioned that without the supplemental budget, "public libraries will have to remain closed or underutilized, denying access to vital educational and cultural resources."

Funding for libraries has already taken a blow from the federal side. "The Trump administration permanently closed the offices of the Institute of Museums and Library Sciences in April of 2025," Mr. Oriol explained. "The current federal budget shows no allocations which would incorporate the operation of libraries." Therefore, DPNR anticipates that the \$138,000 received in FY2025, used to pay for service subscriptions and outreach supplies, will be the last such funding.

That revelation prompted committee chair Senator Novelle Francis to query the status of other federal grants. According to the DPNR commissioner, there are no grants in immediate "jeopardy," but funding allocated to the Coral Reef Conservation Program could decrease. In the Big Beautiful Bill, the pot of funding for recipient states and territories was reduced from \$34 million to \$26 million. The USVI "will probably lose like \$200,000" Mr. Oriol estimated. Funding under the Clean Drinking Water Act is also expected to be reduced.

With \$129,078,186 in federal funding on the table, lawmakers emphasized the need to spend before funds are recalled. Federal funds cover 102 of DPNR's positions. "Unfortunately, we can't predict what will happen on the federal side," Mr. Oriol told Senator Blyden. However, he assured that DPNR is doing what it can internally to expedite spending. Approximately \$100 million of the aforementioned federal funding figure is passed through to other entities like the Waste Management Authority and the Water and Power Authority.

“Are you keeping their feet to the fire? Because I don't [want to] hear that these funds be de-obligated, and we don't get to spend it,” Senator Avery Lewis asked. Commissioner Oriol replied in the affirmative, stating that standing meetings with sub-grantees are part of DPNR’s operations.

Outside of federal fund spending and supplemental budget considerations, the DPR plans to use its general fund request to pay salaries and fringe benefits for 61 positions to the tune of \$4,894,087, while \$238,302 is set aside for supplies. Other services and charges will cost \$1,271,514, and \$605,584 was allocated for utilities. According to Mr. Oriol, "the appropriation also covers required local match funding for several federal grants.”

DPNR is also dependent on \$10,861,427 in non-appropriated local funds derived from fees, fines and rentals of submerged and filled submerged land. As of May 31 2025, DPNR had already collected \$3,435,196 and anticipates collecting approximately \$8,\$452,461, the FY2024 total collection. These funds cover 42 positions at \$3,843,350, supplies at \$522,953, other services at \$4,909,976, and \$47,000 for utilities. A further \$1,538,148 is earmarked for capital outlay.

The department anticipates embarking on a series of projects and programs in FY2026, including continued work on the territory’s libraries. The Virgin Islands State Historic Preservation Office will publish a historic district guide with “clear guidance on making improvements within the historic districts, including the application process.” An upcoming collaboration with NASA “will support lifelong learning and promote engagement with STEM content through technology integration” at the Division of Libraries, Archives and Museums.