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St. Croix Mosquito Project Discontinued as Planned; Health Officials Say

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The Virgin Islands Department of Health said Friday that as of April 8, due to delays brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic, the St. Croix Mosquito Project has been discontinued as initially planned.

This was decided collaboratively by project partners VIDOH, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), and the National Association of County and City Health Officials (NACCHO), Verily, and MosquitoMate due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, the department said.

D.O.H. stressed that the project, also known as a Sterile Insect Technique (SIT), would not have involved genetic modification. Concerns were voiced by community members and lawmakers, among them Senator Kenneth Gittens, when the project was announced last year.

The St. Croix Mosquito Project aimed to reduce the *Aedes aegypti* mosquito, which can spread dengue, Zika, and Chikungunya, according to D.O.H. In the upcoming weeks, D.O.H., CDC, and NACCHO will work to modify the overall project goals.

“Due to delays brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic, the St. Croix Mosquito Project has been discontinued as originally planned. There is, however, a high risk for a dengue outbreak predicted for 2020 as Puerto Rico has reported over 120 cases. The VIDOH will continue to work with our partners on other mitigation options to include vector control training, community engagement and personal responsibility, and spraying high density communities,” said Health Commissioner Justa Encarnacion.

Dengue can result in severe illness and sometimes death and outbreaks typically result in a high number of hospitalizations. Given the COVID-19 pandemic, everyone should take steps to protect themselves from both illnesses, D.O.H. said.

Health officials said that in the community engagement survey conducted to date, almost all feedback has been positive. Support for the project was shown by Governor Bryan, St. Croix Administrator Sammuel Sanes, and Chief of Staff Karl Knight, D.O.H. stressed.

"At our community engagement kickoff at the Agriculture and Food Fair on St. Croix, the VIDOH spoke to over 400 people about the project. In addition, VIDOH held three focus groups where 21 of 23 focus group participants voiced project support. VIDOH staff conducted interviews with the HealthBuzz and On the FlipSide, and fielded questions from callers and provided up-to-date project information. Additionally, VIDOH staff delivered over 280 flyers to homes and businesses throughout the community," the department said.

The Health Department strongly encouraged residents to take personal protective measures to protect themselves from mosquito bites and dengue. Empty standing water from around your property weekly, wear an EPA-registered repellent, and make sure all screens on windows, doors, and cistern spouts remain in good condition.