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Brown Water Crisis on St. Croix: Lawmakers Call for State of Emergency Declaration

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WAPA's brown, undrinkable water crisis on St. Croix has persisted for years.

As residents of St. Croix grapple with persistent issues of brown, undrinkable water flowing from their taps, lawmakers are calling for a state of emergency declaration to address the crisis.

WAPA CEO Andrew Smith, in a detailed discussion with the Senate Committee on Disaster Recovery, Infrastructure, and Planning, attributed the problem to the island's aging water system, which includes pipes that are 60 years old or more. These iron pipes are deteriorating and leaching rust into the water supply, a situation exacerbated by drought conditions that have left WAPA's water tanks at dangerously low levels—some falling below 50%.

Although Federal Emergency Management System (FEMA) has committed to replacing the island's entire wastewater system, residents face immediate challenges, including persistent odors and the potential for costly utility-scale filtration systems. Senators Alma Francis-Heyliger and Samuel Carrion are urging quick action, pointing out that federal resources could be tapped to assist the community.

“The age of the St. Croix water system is at the core of the source of brown water on St. Croix,” Mr. Smith told lawmakers. “The bulk of the brown water is due to the deterioration of the pipes and sediment ending up in the water from the iron in the pipes,” he added, noting that low water inventory has exacerbated the problem.

“Due to the drought, WAPA’s water tanks are currently only about 50% full with some tanks having fallen below 50% over the past several weeks before being recently restored,” Mr. Smith further stated. “The current low inventory levels result in lower water pressure, resulting in lower water flow volumes and thus increase discoloration.”

The town of Frederiksted is most impacted by the discolored water, but Mr. Smith denied that it was because the area was suffering from underinvestment by WAPA. Rather, Frederiksted is disadvantaged due to its distance from a high water point in St. Croix’s gravity-based water distribution system.

Normally, WAPA would deal with a brown water issue by opening up fire hydrants on a rotating basis to flush the system. However, in a low-water-inventory scenario, that would just make matters worse, as “aggressive flushing” would merely reduce already low water pressure through the system, increasing the water discoloration problem.

Replacing the decades-old rusting pipes would cost over a \$1 billion, said Mr. Smith – almost the entirety of the territory’s annual budget. Ms. Francis Heyliger inquired about whether consideration had been given to declaring a state of emergency, and Senator Samuel Carrion said that he already wrote to Governor Albert Bryan Jr. some weeks ago asking him to do just that.

“I have yet to hear from his office,” Mr. Carrion disclosed, insisting that it was “prudent for us to move in this direction to be able to tap into federal resources available and provide assistance to our community.”

The Federal Emergency Management System has already [committed to replacing](#) the entire wastewater system on St. Croix, an endeavor that is expected to cost \$1.5 - \$2 billion. In July, WAPA officials [told lawmakers](#) that they were working towards an application for a FEMA-funded prudent replacement of St. Croix’s entire water system. Mr. Smith said on Thursday that the application was “far along in the process”. However, that potential fix is still some ways off. For the near term, WAPA is considering some localized solutions, including “utility-scale filtration systems” that are deployed in areas experiencing the biggest water quality issues. However, those solutions have yet to be costed. “EPA is..working with FEMA and talking with FEMA about what those options would be,” Mr. Smith said.

Mr. Smith also addressed a recent odor problem, saying that the stench in the water “was due to an influx of Sargassum several weeks ago.” Filters in the desalination plant can remove large particles in the seawater, but once the algae begins to decompose “the resulting discoloration and associated odor in the seawater that ends up in the drinking water cannot be removed by filtration,” he explained.

This odor has persisted despite the reduction in sargassum levels for two reasons, according to Mr. Smith. First, people with cisterns running low due to the drought are now using WAPA water, which has been sitting in their pipes and has a residual odor from the sargassum influx, he explained. Also, “the low system flow described above as it relates to brown water causes the same residual effect with the odor from Sargassum,” Mr. Smith said.

Now that water levels have risen somewhat, Mr. Smith says that WAPA is doing more regular flushing of the system as well as adding more water treatment chemicals and undertaking more quality testing. These efforts aim to ameliorate the issues being experienced by customers. According to the WAPA CEO, the authority's water “continues to meet U.S. Environmental Protection Agency primary standards, which are the standards WAPA is required to meet.” However, he did admit that testing is not being done at system endpoints, i.e. the taps in homes and businesses across the territory, which is where most quality issues are being reported.

Despite the poor quality of water WAPA admits is being supplied to some customers, especially in areas of St. Croix, Mr. Smith defended the [recently approved](#) increase in the Levelized Energy Adjustment Clause (LEAC) for water, noting that WAPA’s charges reflect only the cost of providing water to customers. He noted that the basis for the LEAC increase was a hike in contractual rates between WAPA and Seven Seas, WAPA’s supplier of drinking water. He also noted that Seven Seas was not the source or cause of WAPA’s brown water problem. Mr. Smith also noted that historical under-recovery of costs, partially represented by an artificially-low LEAC, meant that WAPA did not have the necessary funding base to invest in key areas of its water systems.