

The Virgin Islands Consortium

WAPA's Expensive Composite Poles Prove Fragile Against Car Crashes; Authority Plans to Sue for Damages

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Nelcia Charlemagne **September 08, 2023**



Composite pole installation in the U.S. Virgin Islands. By. FEMA

During Thursday's Senate Committee meeting on Disaster Recovery, Infrastructure, and Planning, WAPA Executive Director Andrew Smith revealed that the installation of composite utility poles designed to withstand high winds is 90% complete. However, concerns were raised about the poles' vulnerability to vehicular accidents after two were observed "completely broken in half" on St. John.

WAPA officials acknowledged the issue and discussed ongoing initiatives to replace damaged poles and seek reimbursement from those responsible for the damage.

WAPA Project Manager Cordell Jacobs revealed that “so far we have installed roughly 7600 of the 8600” fiberglass polymer poles. Mr. Jacobs explained that the new poles are rated to withstand 180 mph winds, and come with a 41-year manufacturer warranty against windstorm damage. Together with the effort to relocate key electrical transmission and distribution feeders underground, the composite utility poles are intended to make the island more resilient to the impact of natural disasters, particularly hurricanes.

However, Senator Alma Francis Heyliger noted that she had seen two poles “completely broken in half” on St. John. “When these things were initially marketed to us after the hurricanes, we were told that they’re flexible...how are these poles just breaking?”

Ashley Bryan, WAPA’s chief operating officer for electric systems, responded. “The short answer is: vehicular accidents. They are resilient but they’re not impact proof,” he said.

As Mr. Smith explained, the force of high winds, which might cause the poles to sway back and forth, is much different from the jarring impact of a vehicular collision at 50 miles per hour, which the poles are not able to withstand.

Ms. Francis Heyliger was concerned about potential disruptions to the grid if poles keep getting broken by drivers smashing into them. Ms. Bryan said that WAPA was working on several initiatives to mitigate the issue. “We’re working with FEMA for WAPA to internally acquire the equipment necessary to maintain those systems. But while doing so we intend to replace those broken poles with wood poles,” she noted.

Senator Kenneth Gittens wanted to know how WAPA was recouping the losses represented by these broken pieces of its infrastructure.

Mr. Smith said the authority is aware of four damaged composite poles, all in Coral Bay. “I hate to use the word perpetrator,” he said, “but...whoever ran into those poles and damaged them – be they composite poles or not – we go after those individuals to pursue recovering the cost, particularly for composite poles because they’re very expensive.” He indicated that ultimately, these individuals would be sued.