

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Amidst Hurricane Season, VITEMA Grapples with Faulty Tsunami Sirens

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A VITEMA siren.

Even at the height of the annual hurricane season, the V.I. Territorial Management Agency has not lost sight of the threat of another type of natural disaster — a tsunami — potentially poses to the territory.

During Tuesday's hearing of the Senate Committee on Homeland Security, Justice and Public Safety, VITEMA Executive Director Daryl Jaschen testified that the agency continues to test tsunami sirens every third Thursday of each month.

Since testing started at the [beginning of the year](#), VITEMA now has a count of 12 nonfunctional sirens: one on St. John, five on St. Thomas, and six on St. Croix. There is a contract in place to repair the most badly damaged sirens. Senator Franklin Johnson wondered whether replacements could be had at no cost, a question Mr. Jaschen answered in the negative. The ones damaged during hurricanes Irma and Maria have been repaired, the VITEMA director explained. "Now since 2017 to date, there had been additional damage that occurred or things that have decayed over that timeframe because they're exposed to the saltwater environment."

Despite having to once more provide funds for repairing or replacing the sirens currently out of commission, Mr. Jaschen sounded an optimistic note, saying that "we have \$100,000 right now ready to go to fix the ones on St. Croix. So that's a step forward."

The sirens on St. Thomas, he said, will be addressed in the "next couple of weeks." The only remaining uncertainty was the siren in the Roman Hill/Rock Hill road of St. John. "We have to figure out how to get that one fixed," Mr. Jaschen said.

One complicating factor affecting the repairs, Mr. Jaschen noted, was that a lot of time is being being spent trying to figure out what the root cause of each faulty siren is. VITEMA's Assistant Director Stephen DeBlasio Sr. clarified the situation regarding a siren near the St. Thomas airport. After the 2017 hurricanes, an inspection revealed that the siren and its pole had survived the storm and only a new pole was needed. However, by the time contractors arrived to replace the pole, both the pole and the siren had disappeared. DeBlasio noted that because the original FEMA-funded repair project only budgeted for a new pole, not a complete siren replacement, this particular siren could not be replaced.

Responding to a question from Senator Kenneth Gittens about where the siren could have disappeared to, Mr. DeBlasio said that VITEMA was seeking answers "from Port Authority and others who may have known what happened." He added, "For some reason, someone removed the pole and the siren head." He noted that VITEMA only realized that the siren was missing some time in 2020, when contractors went in to execute repairs.