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Excessive Heat to Last Through September, Posing Health Risks to Human and Marine Life

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With excessive heat across the region expected to continue until October, the VI Territorial Emergency Management Agency is advising residents of the territory to take action to protect themselves against heat exhaustion and heat strokes.

During Monday's Government House Press Briefing, VITEMA Executive Director Daryl Jaschen noted that St. Croix has observed daily heat records for the last 12 days. The National Weather Service in Puerto Rico has issued an advisory for the territories, which according to Mr. Jaschen means "that a period of hot temperatures is expected. The combination of high temperatures and high humidity will combine to create a situation in which heat illness[es] are possible."

Residents are encouraged to increase their fluid consumption and if possible, remain in air-conditioned spaces. Regardless, the public is advised to keep out of the direct sun as much as possible and to ensure frequent rest breaks for those who work outdoors.

“If you are a supervisor, please look out for your individuals,” Mr. Jaschen said, noting that the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) has issued recommendations to reduce the risk of heat-related illness during outdoor work.

Strenuous activities should be rescheduled to early morning or evening, wherever possible, and people should endeavor to wear light-colored, loose-fitting clothing when they can, Mr. Jaschen advised.

In its Heat Outlook for September 2023 to February 2024, the Caribbean Climate Outlook Forum (CariCOF) said that August and September of this year would be the worst for heat, with September being particularly difficult. The heat is not only posing dangers to humans, but also to marine life. Record-breaking sea surface temperatures in the Caribbean Sea and Northern Atlantic have caused heat stress to coral reefs across the entire Caribbean basin, which has resulted in an alarming increase in coral bleaching, a threat to the reefs which can protect many islands from the worst of hurricane-induced sea swells and adverse marine conditions.

While coral can recover from some level of bleaching, severe or extended heat stress makes death more likely. Additionally, those corals which do survive are less able to grow and reproduce, and are more vulnerable to disease up to four years after recovery, according to Derek Manzello, the Coral Reef Watch Coordinator for the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA).

Whether to people or to marine life, the dangerously high temperatures will pose major risks to health & wellness until they abate sometime next month.