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Bill Credit Promised to St. Croix Residents Amid Water Crisis; Senators Slam Government's Response

Senators Express Outrage Over Water Contamination Handling; Demand Swift and Effective Remediation

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Maria Friday, a resident of Estate Colquhoun, holding a heavily stained filter during Friday's Committee of the Whole on St. Croix. By. V.I. LEGISLATURE

During an intense session of the 35th Legislature's Committee of the Whole on Friday, V.I. Water and Power Authority CEO Andrew Smith revealed plans to credit St. Croix residents affected by the lead and copper water emergency with a bill credit.

"WAPA is currently working with Government House on the logistics of implementing a bill credit and how that will be processed through WAPA's billing system," he stated. The credit will

be applied retroactively from October, coinciding with the initial alert of elevated lead and copper levels. It will be adjusted based on the recommended duration for flushing systems, funded by the central government.

The Committee of the Whole hearing, marked by tense exchanges, also heard from Maria Friday, a resident of Estate Colquhoun. Ms. Friday, holding a heavily stained filter, conveyed the fears of her community. “Our residents in Colquhoun are ensnared in a web of anxiety,” she said. “Every time they turn on the tap, they are faced with potential harm; harm in drinking, harm in cooking...such rudimentary activities now carry the risk of lead-induced cognitive impairment in children and severe health implications in adults.”

Ms. Friday also raised concerns about the broader implications for the island's ecosystem, including livestock and agriculture. “You might not have thought about that – it also affects the livestock, it affects gardening and it affects everybody in this community,” she added, questioning who would ensure the safety of the meat supply. Ms. Friday's impassioned plea for immediate action was clear: “We urge rapid, comprehensive action to stave off a crisis....The urgency is palpable. And you know what? We must act now. Not tomorrow. Not a year from now. Not when the money is there. This is a true crisis in our entire Virgin Islands.”

Aimee Griles-Cariño, executive director of Our Town Frederiksted, echoed the sentiment of betrayal felt by the community. “Our community’s trust is deeply shaken,” she stated, referring to past assurances about water safety. OTF’s stance was firm: utility bills for the duration of contamination should be waived. “It is unacceptable for the impacted customers to be burdened with utility bills for water that has been compromised by lead,” Ms. Griles-Cariño declared.

WAPA, in collaboration with the Department of Planning and Natural Resources will also be providing in-home filters, Mr. Smith said. “Affected customers will receive one filter with replacement cartridges to cover one year of use.” Lawmakers were told that officials were in talks with three suppliers in the hopes of purchasing 10,000 filters for local distribution, with funds from the Clean Water Act underwriting the initial purchase.

This announcement was met with scrutiny from lawmakers, including Senator Diane Capeheart, who urged against cost-cutting on essential items. “Don’t shortage the people with the cheapest filter you can find,” she warned, while Senator Franklin Johnson highlighted Ms. Friday’s stain-encrusted filter while querying who determines how long the replacement cartridges would last.

In large part, lawmakers were dissatisfied with what they deemed WAPA’s disingenuous messaging and lackluster response. “Would you be willing to taste this water?” Senator Johnson asked Mr. Smith. “Would you cook with this water? Why tell my people...that it’s safe for drinking?”

Mr. Smith sidestepped the question at first. “I did not say people should drink it. I said that the water was safe.” After being pressed again by the senator, WAPA’s CEO responded. I would drink it. I would choose not to drink it. But I understand it’s safe to drink.”

Informing the WAPA executive that some residents of affected areas do not have cisterns, Sen. Johnson admonished Mr. Smith. “Some of them don’t have a choice,” he said, raising his voice. “I just don’t know how to be calm with this, because it’s not a situation to be calm.” Visibly angry at this point, the senator continued. “If you can’t consume it, don’t ever tell people around here that it’s safe to drink. And that goes for you and the governor,” Mr. Johnson retorted.

Senator Samuel Carrion grilled WAPA representatives about plans to ensure affected residents were provided with safe, alternative sources of water. “Not everyone can afford to purchase water,” he noted, reiterating Sen. Johnson’s point that some consumers do not have cisterns. “It’s been practically almost a month now. What are we doing?” he queried.

Stephen DeBlasio, assistant director for the Territorial Emergency Management Agency, said there were no plans to distribute water at this time, a response Sen. Carrion described as “really sad.” He questioned whether officials truly believed that the situation was an emergency. “Are we in a crisis...? it doesn’t seem so with the way we’re acting.” He called the current posture of the executive branch “unacceptable.” Sen. Capeheart said that she was not hearing the right things from the authorities. “I want to hear water distribution centers because we are telling individuals not to drink this water.” She urged those responsible to move with haste in requesting a presidential emergency declaration, so that funding for necessary interventions could be allocated.

Senator Marvin Blyden also noted his displeasure with the lack of concrete action to mitigate the impact on affected residents. “I still haven’t heard many solutions in terms of the immediate fix for these individuals in the St. Croix district...find a way to get it done,” he demanded.

Senator Milton Potter, a lawmaker from the St. Thomas-St. John District, was one of the only lawmakers who seemed satisfied with the current emergency response. “I don’t think that our response necessarily came too late. I think we’re in the process of working our way through this matter, trying to find more definitive conclusions as to specific causes,” he said, calling for a prudent, deliberative approach. “It’s important to not just do a whole lot of things in a reactionary manner,” he cautioned. “It is important for us to be measured in our response with critical information, with objective data.” Amidst the heightened emotions of Thursday’s hearing, Sen. Potter pushed for calm. “I don’t know if anger or frustration is necessarily a solution.”