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Senator Francis Heyliger Spearheads Relief Bills for St. Croix Ratepayers and Water Safety

Legislation offers six-month water bill relief and mandates annual lead testing

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Senator Alma Francis-Heyliger introduces legislation to bring relief to St. Croix residents affected by discolored and contaminated water. By. THE V.I. LEGISLATURE

New legislation proposed by Senator Alma Francis Heyliger during a Tuesday session was voted upon favorably by her colleagues, as lawmakers explore various ways to assist residents of St. Croix affected by discolored water, which in some areas was found to contain high levels of lead and copper.

The two bills aim to ease some of the financial burden incurred by customers and promote the early detection of similar contamination in the future.

Bill 35-020, as explained by Ms. Francis Heyliger, would require the Water and Power Authority "to issue a monthly water bill abatement for six months to residential and commercial customers receiving potable water service in an area impacted by unsatisfactory levels of lead and copper." Meanwhile, Bill 35-0201 which was also sponsored by Ms. Heyliger Francis, initially required owners and operators of public water systems to conduct yearly testing for lead and copper. Following an amendment, the measure now includes the same requirement for operators of private water systems.

Ms. Francis Heyliger explained that she was moved to present this legislation [after listening to testimonies from affected residents](#) and WAPA during a recent meeting of the Committee of the Whole.

"What we're offering to the island of St. Croix - in the affected areas - is a discount for six months," she explained. Speaking to her second proposed bill, the senator noted that requirements for lead and copper testing are already in the Virgin Islands' law books. However, "with this piece of legislation, we're going to make it a requirement that it's done on an annual basis so that we could have more data, information, and recording...so that things do not happen like this again."

When the draft legislation was presented, several lawmakers signed on to both bills as cosponsors, and the measures immediately gained the support of every senator present. During his allotted time, Senator Samuel Carrion asserted that it is "unfair and unjust for individuals in our community to be paying these bills when the water that they're receiving is not good for consumption, cooking, or most uses." He also agreed that considering the USVI's "current circumstances," regular testing of the territory's water systems is crucial.

Senator Angel Bolques Jr., too, supported the measures, saying the abatement proposed in Bill 35-0200 will help "ease the pain" felt by affected ratepayers on St. Croix. He referred to Bill 35-0201 as a "proactive approach." Senator Milton Potter declared, "It is simply the right thing to do," while Senator Ray Fonseca observed that "WAPA still has to do better with water service."

Senator Diane Capehart contended that "we need better accountability," as she voiced support for both bills. She added that residents of St. Croix are counting on lawmakers to implement laws for their protection.

Bills 35-0200 and 35-0201 will now proceed to the governor for further action, along with Bill 35-0190. The latter, in part, seeks to appropriate \$350,000 from the General Fund to supply bottled drinking water to residents in St. Croix who are most impacted by the elevated levels of heavy metals in the potable water.