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Officials Seek to Ease St. Croix's Water Crisis in 90 Days Following Biden's Partial Federal State of Emergency Declaration

VITEMA director outlines federal support measures and continued local efforts to address contamination and supply issues

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Nelcia Charlemagne **November 20, 2023**

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A request for a declaration of a federal state of emergency to handle the water crisis on St. Croix has been partially approved by President Joe Biden. That decision, explained Virgin Islands Territorial Emergency Management Agency (VITEMA) Director Daryl Jaschen, was predicated upon “the current assessment and degree of federal assistance requested.”

Mr. Jaschen, speaking at Monday's Government House press briefing, said that for a full declaration to be made, “we have to demonstrate...that we are overwhelmed with our assets.” This

is not the current reality in the USVI, with ample drinking water supply available locally. However, Mr. Jachsen confirmed that the situation is fluid. If supply chain hiccups affect the bottled water supply, “FEMA comes in for a short period of time [to] provide that assistance.”

The partial declaration affords the USVI 90 days of support, and “must be focused on providing direct federal assistance, providing emergency protective measures, continuing the [state of] emergency, as well as improving the conditions for our community,” said the VITEMA director. As he explained in response to a question from the Consortium, the major difference from what currently obtains with the local state of emergency declaration is access to additional technical support by way of “direct federal assistance.”

For example, Mr. Jaschen explained that were the Water and Power Authority to encounter difficulty in digging up or identifying compromised line components, “we can look at direct federal assistance being contracted outside of WAPA and paid...by the federal government beforehand, and not having to go back and get reimbursed.” This, he said, would serve as a “big financial boost going forward.”

On the technical side, Mr. Jaschen revealed that conversations are taking place regarding requesting support from the Army Corps of Engineers to assist with ongoing infrastructural assessments. The new support, he said, is expected to produce a “stronger partnership.”

Conversations will continue with FEMA, too, to show that “we've either kept things from getting worse, or we've started to provide some relief to the community here on St. Croix,” he said.

Various government departments continue to collaborate to provide relief to those affected by water discoloration and by the discovery of heavy metal contamination in certain parts of St. Croix’s water distribution system. Voucher distribution [began over the weekend](#), providing affected residents with the means to acquire up to \$100 worth of bottled drinking water at selected outlets. At-home water filtration systems are also being sourced, although Mr. Jaschen was unable to provide a timeframe for their arrival in St. Croix. “Right now there is not a date for that,” he admitted to the Consortium.

In the interim, sampling and testing of various points along the water distribution system is set to continue. Testing will be supported by vigorous physical assessments. Entities including WAPA and the Department of Planning and Natural Resources are using test results to identify “where on that service line are we finding the actual lead and copper leaching out so that we can then focus our efforts on that Find and Replace [Program],” explained VITEMA’s director.