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Over \$1 Million Spent on Bovoni Landfill Fire Response, Lawmakers Learn During Comprehensive After-Action Update

Intensive collaboration and resources deployed to extinguish weeks-long landfill fire; future strategies discussed for fire prevention

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First responders work to contain Bovoni Landfill fire on Sept. 14, 2023. By. VIFEMS

On Wednesday, lawmakers received a comprehensive final update on the multi-agency efforts to combat the recent fire at the Bovoni Landfill, which [burned and smoldered](#) for weeks in September before it was finally extinguished.

Daryl Jaschen, director of the V.I. Territorial Management Agency, provided joint testimony on behalf of government agencies. He noted that the Bovoni fire unified command met twice daily until October 4, and told lawmakers that over 1.85 million gallons of water were used in firefighting efforts. Conditions were exacerbated because “virtually no precipitation fell on the Bovoni Landfill” during the 22-day operation, he said.

Mr. Jaschen noted that off-island support came from Puerto Rico’s National Guard, which spent two days dousing the fire with seawater using a helicopter bucket. The support from Puerto Rico was made possible via a governor-to-governor Emergency Management Assistance Compact, which ensures that the almost \$74,000 cost incurred over the two-day period will be reimbursed to the neighboring territory. That sum is not included in the over \$1 million spent locally on response efforts, Mr. Jaschen noted.

He said that part of the firefighting efforts included the collection of qualitative data, which transcended “mere statistics to provide the community with essential information concerning health conditions, safety plans, access to clean water, and evacuation procedures.”

The V.I. Department of Health used this data to initiate “educational campaigns aimed at increasing awareness of health risks stemming from smoke and pollutants,” he said. VIFEMS, VITEMA, and the Department of Health are planning to host a townhall meeting, Mr. Jaschen disclosed, which would take a closer look at this data, which “empowers the community to collectively identify priorities and resolutions.”

In terms of preventative measures, the VITEMA director told lawmakers that since October 1 about 22,500 cubic yards of green waste had been moved to the back of the landfill. The next month or so will be spent covering the entire green waste area with over 30,000 cubic yards of material, “which should prevent a future fire,” he said. While normal operations at the landfill have now resumed, no green waste is being accepted.

Instead, the Waste Management Authority’s future plan is to use a recent \$6 million waste diversion grant to “develop standard operating procedures for handling of green and other waste territory-wide.”

Mr. Jaschen then paid tribute to the late Daryl George, the former VIFEMS director who played a pivotal role in the firefighting effort. It was Mr. George who recommended the state of emergency, and the solicitation of support from the Puerto Rico National Guard, Mr. Jaschen said. Mr. George also provided the impetus for the unified command with VITEMA, and created a rotation schedule for firefighters including those stationed on St. Croix. “Director George indicated to Governor Bryan that this was the worst fire he had seen in over 30 years of fighting fires,” Mr. Jaschen recounted.

In dissecting the response to the fire, chair of the Committee on Health, Hospitals and Human Services, Senator Ray Fonseca, wondered whether the 2,500 foot distance between the landfill and the closest hydrant slowed down firefighting efforts. St. John Deputy Fire Chief Magabe Calixte said that a meeting had been held with several stakeholders including the Water and Power Authority, the Waste Management Authority and others, to discuss bringing a fire hydrant closer to the scale station. “WAPA was kind of on the fence about it,” Mr. Calixte disclosed, “but they said that they would give their expertise in terms of engineering and also in terms of sourcing material.”

A “Plan B”, Mr. Calixte said, involved the use of the on-site water treatment plant. Noting that there were initial concerns that using that water could pose a contamination risk from sewage or

bacteria, Mr. Calixte said that experts on the subject assured that the water “was good enough for firefighting.”

VIFEMS representatives thanked local water haulers for providing services despite still being owed money since July 2023. Senator Milton Potter took umbrage at that disclosure, noting that lawmakers “unanimously supported \$200,000 to pay these private water haulers, and to my astonishment, feedback that I’ve gotten from some...is that [they] still have not been paid.”

Mr. Potter called the news “troubling,” while Senator Donna Frett-Gregory took the opportunity to address the obvious absence in the room. “Where is Waste Management in all of this?” she asked, noting that WMA Director Roger Merritt had indicated that he and his team “were not available.”

Despite Mr. Jaschen’s testimony on behalf of the WMA and other government agencies, Sen. Frett-Gregory noted that “we are hearing today that we don’t even know what the strategic plan is around moving the green waste from the landfill. That is a problem. We cannot continue to put our firefighters at risk while we have not established a strategy to address this issue.

Sen. Fonseca called on VIFEMS to “put together a plan and bring it to this committee so that we can fund this,” saying that WAPA could not be relied upon to do so as its “hands are full.”