

Environmental Groups Oppose Government Plan to Burn Green Waste On St. Croix

As St. Croix plans to burn accumulated green waste, environmental groups push for amendments to the 2017 “Ban the Burn” bill, advocating for sustainable disposal methods

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Seven years after the Legislature [banned the burning of vegetative debris](#) from Hurricanes Irma and Maria due to an environmental campaign, the same coalition of environmental groups are again advocating against the practice as the V.I. government plans to burn piles of green waste on St. Croix.

The planned burn comes as a result of a request to the Federal Emergency Management Agency by Governor Albert Bryan Jr. late last year, said Virgin Islands Territorial Emergency Management Agency Daryl Jaschen. The burn is meant to be a “solution” to the accumulated

green waste at the V.I. Waste Management Authority landfills. Mr. Jaschen said FEMA has not yet set a date for the burn, which is being deemed a demonstration.?

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers would use air curtain incinerators to burn the debris, according to a statement from FEMA, who directed the Consortium to Government House for further questions. However, multiple requests for comment have received no response from administration officials as of press time.

Air curtain incinerators are advertised by Air Burners Inc., a leading manufacturer, as an “environmentally-friendly solution” which reduces the amount of smoke particles released into the air to the U.S. EPA limit by trapping and re-burning them. Recently, the EPA removed the title V permit previously required for the operation of air curtain incinerators. However, environmental groups, such as the Island Green Living Association and the Sierra Club, say that the EPA is in the process of withdrawing the rule and that burning still poses significant environmental and human health risks. “Reduced does not mean zero,” noted Harith Wickrema, president of the Island Green Living Association.?

In addition to the harm environmental groups say air curtain incinerators pose, the coalition of organizations against the issue also share concerns about the “green” waste not being solely composed of natural material. “It was hurricane debris, and all kinds of stuff got melted into that hurricane debris,” said Jane Williams, chair of the National Clean Air Team for the Sierra Club. Because St. Croix’s hurricane debris was transferred to the Anguilla Landfill, Williams argues that the waste that the government is now seeking to burn is not green waste but solid waste. According to Williams, the USVI government would therefore be violating the federal Clean Air Act, as section 129 of the Act requires a permit for the burning of solid waste. “In order to burn a scrap of commingled waste like this, you need to have a permit. You can't do a demonstration project,” Williams said.?

For Williams, the site chosen for the air curtain incinerator demonstration—the Anguilla Landfill—represents systemic tactics of environmental racism. “It's sort of the tenet of environmental justice that you sacrifice certain parts of your population so that you can have either waste management activities or industrial activities. So you definitely see that these activities get clustered together,” Williams said. According to a 2014 University of the Virgin Islands study, St. Croix’s South Shore Industrial Zone has a higher percentage of Black residents than the study’s reference area and those residents experience asthma at rates twice as high as other residents.

In Act 8018, the 2017 “Ban the Burn” bill, legislators echoed these concerns, citing the high percentage of people in the Virgin Islands who suffer from asthma or other diseases made worse by air pollution as reasons to prohibit the burning of hurricane debris. But while local environmental groups say that the intention of the 2017 bill was to ban the burning of all green debris, according to the text of the legislation, the ban only prohibits the burning of green debris specifically produced by Hurricanes Irma and Maria. Environmentalists have pointed to another part of the bill – its directive for various government departments to collaboratively implement a plan for a composting and mulching program. They also note the mandate to conduct a study on the economic and health impacts burning green debris would have. These portions of the 2017 measure, they say, have been ignored.

“Part of the law stated they need to do a study and do composting and they didn't do that for the last seven years, and they did not provide a strategic plan. Every time they went in front of the Legislature they told them there's going to be a strategic plan. We got a plan to do this, a plan to

do that. No, it has not been presented,” Mr. Wickrema said, referencing section 2 of the Act which states that money must be obtained from FEMA to purchase the necessary equipment to compost and mulch the debris from the hurricanes.

While Mr. Jaschen said that the demonstration burn is just one route the governor might take in handling the green waste that has accumulated in the USVI, according to him, the other option—composting—has “historically” had “limited demand” in the territory. However, environmentalists paint a different story, claiming that with the recent passing of the [Territorial Agricultural Plan](#) and the plan for public schools to implement composting into their schools, the territorial demand for composting is clear.?

“It was clearly the intent of [the Legislature] that the waste will be composted,” Williams said. “If it’s green waste, it should be chipped and mulched and given to farmers for compost. It’s a very dangerous idea to start taking your green waste off your island.”

According to a statement from the Island Green Living Association, the coalition of environmental groups are specifically calling for [Act 8018](#) to be amended to “ban the burning of all vegetative debris, stipulate that the provision of funds currently earmarked for incineration plans at Anguilla Landfill be instead diverted to purchasing composting and mulching equipment, which should have been procured six years ago, and require that the study mandated in the original Act, to research the impacts of burning, be completed before any incineration takes place.” Mr. Wickrema says he has contacted 15 senators, asking for their support in amending the bill.

While Mr. Jaschen cited the state of emergency which ensued after the [2023 Bovoni landfill fire](#) as reasons for the government to seek the option of burning the territory’s green waste, environmentalists remain nonplussed at the idea of the demonstration burn — viewing the decision not to compost as emblematic of government priorities at odds with the best interest of the community.

“Why is this something that the Army Corps cares about when you still don’t have an operating hospital?,” Williams asked. “The hospital still has not been rebuilt. Your power system is falling apart. Your refinery exploded. There’s a lot of things going on on the island St. Croix that seemed to me to be much higher priority than this.”