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Senate Passes Bill Mandating WAPA to Seek Federal Aid for Grid Modernization

Frett-Gregory announced the passage of Bill No. 35-0311, mandating WAPA to seek federal assistance within 60 days to address power outages and outdated equipment, with plans for grid modernization to be submitted within 270 days

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The Randolph Harley Power Plant in St. Thomas, USVI. By. V.I. CONSORTIUM

Senator Donna Frett-Gregory on Tuesday announced the passage of Bill No. 35-0311, which mandates that the V.I. Water and Power Authority seek federal technical assistance within 60 days to modernize its electrical grid. “I strongly believe that it’s time for us to really engage the federal partners in a meaningful way,” Frett-Gregory stated.

According to the senator, the measure, passed during Monday's marathon session, was influenced by a recent meeting with U.S. Secretary of Energy Jennifer Granholm. During her visit, Secretary Granholm emphasized the "unacceptable" power reliability issues affecting U.S. Virgin Islands residents and indicated that the U.S. Department of Energy would be willing to provide federal technical assistance to WAPA if requested.

Frett-Gregory highlighted the urgency of the situation, noting the ongoing state of emergency characterized by rotating power outages, outdated equipment, and failures in generating capacity and distribution. "We must solicit the assistance we need. While no one is coming to save us, we do have support mechanisms available that can assist through these challenging times and we should utilize them," she added.

The bill requires WAPA to submit a proposed modernization plan to the Legislature within 270 days of receiving federal technical assistance from the U.S. Department of Energy, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, and other relevant federal agencies. This plan must detail the steps and timeline for implementing upgrades to the electrical grid, focusing on efficiency, reliability, and resilience. It should incorporate recommendations and best practices from federal agencies and prioritize the use of renewable energy sources, energy storage solutions, and smart grid technologies.

Additionally, the measure calls for WAPA to explore the provision of small-scale, home battery backup systems powered by solar energy for all residential customers. This initiative aims to reduce grid costs for WAPA while providing customers with sustainable electricity during grid disruptions or outages, according to the press release. The bill references a pilot program by Green Mountain Power in Vermont, initiated in 2015, which allows residential customers to lease solar-powered batteries that provide renewable backup power during outages.

The bill was passed unanimously by a vote of 14-0 during Monday's session, with one member absent, and will now be forwarded to the governor for consideration.