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Bryan Admits WAPA's Weaknesses Leave Territory Exposed as Storms Approach

In a candid discussion, Governor Albert Bryan Jr. highlighted WAPA's inability to afford external tree trimming services, citing over \$100 million in due payments and a dire financial situation

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Governor Bryan during an interview with Ernice Gilbert on Aug. 28, 2024 at Gov't House on St. Croix. By. V.I. CONSORTIUM

“People clearly have to see that WAPA doesn’t have the means to do bush cutting,” Governor Albert Bryan Jr. said, weighing in on the question of the week: the Water and Power Authority’s ability to prepare itself for another tropical weather system this season.

The governor sat down with Consortium founder Ernice Gilbert on Wednesday night for a wide-ranging discussion. They spent a significant chunk of time discussing the territory's struggling water and energy utility, with Mr. Gilbert initially pressing the governor on the presumed "reactive" nature of WAPA's hurricane preparedness under his administration.

Focusing on the issue of [overgrown vegetation threatening power lines](#), Governor Bryan offered some context. "It's been raining since January, and it hasn't stopped," he declared. Noting that other agencies have been struggling to adequately maintain the grassy verges of the roadways, the governor argued that WAPA is particularly ill-equipped to handle their own challenges managing vegetation. "They barely have the means to purchase generators and do the day-to-day business," Governor Bryan reminded the public.

Facing further questioning, Governor Bryan pointed out that hiring external service providers to handle tree trimming would cost money that WAPA just doesn't have. He recounted how the government's past due energy bill [had to be hastily paid](#) to ensure that the power supply to St. Croix was not turned off. "I mean, that's how serious it is." The lack of cash extends to the ability of WAPA to pay its suppliers as well. "You're talking about sending out a crew, WAPA has over \$100 million in due payments to people," Governor Bryan said, underlining the utility company's precarious financial circumstances. "I can't express how much concern and how serious our energy situation is," he emphasized.

He noted the [local state of energy emergency](#) issued back in April, and said that the subsequent appeal to President Biden for a [federal disaster declaration](#) "was mainly because of WAPA; giving them the assistance now so that they can cut the brush that is hanging in the lines, a lot of which has dropped down."

Despite the work which was done immediately following the passage of Ernesto, Governor Bryan admits that much work is still left to be done. "There are places where the sun is completely blocked out because you have a tree cave, because of all the vegetation growth that we've had over the past year," he told the Consortium. "I don't know if I disagree with you on anything."

Governor Bryan expressed concerns about factors over which officials in the territory had no control — "the lead time on things like transformers and the like" — adding complexity to WAPA's storm preparations. "We've been working with WAPA to get it but trust me, it's a day-to-day thing with WAPA in this state of emergency."?

Nevertheless, Governor Bryan argued that WAPA has been working on improving resilience, making major progress in under-grounding electricity infrastructure, meaning that "miles and miles of power poles" are now no longer at risk of being toppled by high winds. The poles that have remained aboveground have in large part been replaced by composite poles, which are both sturdier in strong winds and installed in locations where they are less likely to be pushed over by falling trees.

When it comes to grass-cutting and vegetation management, Governor Bryan believes that WAPA — and the government in general, should continue to triage its expenses. "I think we have to choose our priorities in a lot of ways, and it's not going to stop raining until at least November, after three or four years of drought." Nevertheless, he acknowledges that the necessary work of WAPA must continue, and so extra crews have been assigned to vegetation clearing duty ahead of any potential upcoming storms, despite the rapid rain-fueled regrowth of the underbrush. "We're going to be chasing our tail a little while on the vegetation," Governor Bryan opined, "but we'll do what we have to do."

