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DPNR Helpless as Uninsured Vessels Remain Abandoned Post-Storm, Facing \$200,000 Cleanup Bill

DPNR struggles to remove derelict boats left by Tropical Storm Ernesto, facing funding challenges and bureaucratic hurdles as uninsured owners abandon their responsibilities

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An abandoned vessel. By. GETTY IMAGES

Three months after the passage of then-Tropical Storm Ernesto, the V.I. Department of Planning and Natural Resources still has not removed the abandoned and derelict vessels left in the territory's waters.

Marlon Hibbert, director of DNPR's Division of Coastal Zone Management, provided an update on the division's efforts during a meeting of the Committee on Homeland Security, Justice, and

Public Safety on Tuesday. He informed senators that after the storm, fifteen vessels had washed ashore, prompting assessments from DPNR's law enforcement officers to identify the boats' owners.

Seven of those owners were immediately identified by the department, and three days after the storm had passed, a press release was issued advising all owners of "their responsibility to remove the vessels from the shoreline within seven days, or they would be considered storm-related debris," Mr. Hibbert testified. Since then, an additional two owners have come forward, with one having since removed their vessel. Remaining are "five vessels in St. Thomas and one on St. Croix to be removed by the department," shared Mr. Hibbert. The seventh will be removed by the owner, as the vessel is insured.

In September, DPNR began working with the Department of Property and Procurement to secure funding for an outside contract to remove the vessels from the territory's waters. As Mr. Hibbert explained, the same contractor being used by the seventh boat owner will also do the work on behalf of DPNR. However, some obstacles, prompting Senator Angel Bolques Jr. to describe the department's efforts as "slow."

Though work on the private vessel was expected to begin in mid-October, Mr. Hibbert reminded lawmakers of a "ruptured sewage line on Norre Gade that was leaking into the harbor through the stormwater outfalls." This apparently placed removal work on hold until the Waste Management Authority completed work to repair the leak. Now, DPNR has again engaged the contractor to finalize a start date for the removal, but "consistent rain and weather have continued to hamper the efforts to remove the vessel as stormwater runoff also impacts the wastewater and stormwater outfalls," Mr. Hibbert disclosed.

Tuesday's conversation also uncovered a disturbing fact. "Currently, a vessel to be registered in the Virgin Islands does not need to be insured," Mr. Hibbert informed lawmakers. He noted that "responsible" owners of insured vessels often sail them to safe harbors in Grenada or St. Martin before storms make landfall. For those who do choose to remain in the Virgin Islands, they are required to move the boats to moorings or hurricane-safe areas.

"There are many of those that once they land, [they are] often abandoned. The owner disappears [and] they are left to the department," bemoaned Mr. Hibbert. The task is not only laborious but expensive. "It takes about \$16,000 to \$20,000 to remove one vessel, and so, of course, there's a funding issue related to that," said the division director.

"We had to encumber somewhere in the region of \$200,000 to remove it, and that money is not coming back. The mooring fees, etcetera, are not sufficient," Mr. Hibbert told Sen. Bolques, who was confounded by this reality. He wondered whether DPNR could initiate conversations with insurance providers to offer coverage for the uninsured. Such coverage, Mr. Hibbert says, already exists. Cost is a factor, according to him.

"It's often a dream for some of these boat owners to own the vessel. Unfortunately, many of them don't have the resources to properly insure it," explained Mr. Hibbert. Others may not have insurance that covers hurricane damage, he added. "Many of them leave the territory and leave the responsibility to us." Similar challenges are experienced by authorities in Puerto Rico and the mainland's east coast, and are "increasingly an issue in Florida," Mr. Hibbert noted.

Apart from just removing abandoned boats from the shoreline, DPNR must also ensure their safe disposal. "Fiberglass is a hazardous material and so a permit has to be issued by the Waste Management Authority," Mr. Hibbert explained, detailing a further complication in the removal

process. DPNR anticipates that this time around, “we may or may not have access to some federal funds to replenish what we had to appropriate from our local sources.”

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