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Kupfer Says 'Based on Information Gathered', WAPA Owned Materials Shipped to BVI Following Hurricanes Irma and Maria

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Pictured center, Lawrence Kupfer, WAPA executive director/CEO By. VI LEGISLATURE

WAPA CEO Lawrence Kupfer sought to clear the authority of information revealed in a lawsuit that could send federal investigators knocking on the utility's doors. A suit filed against the authority in February by 19-year WAPA employee and current Chief Administration Officer, Rupert Pelle, alleged that materials and supplies provided to WAPA by the Federal Emergency Management Agency, were sent to the British Virgin Islands — even as FEMA-provided resources for the territory's rebuild after Hurricanes Irma and Maria were not approved for non-U.S. jurisdictions.

According to the [suit](#), Mr. Pelle invited WAPA upper echelon's ire when he sought information on the illegal shipment of materials provided to the U.S. Virgin Islands by FEMA being shipped to the BVI. At the time Julio Rhymer, Gregory Rhymer's cousin, was executive director/CEO of WAPA.

Mr. Pelle requested information as to why the supplies were being shipped to the BVI, and whether they had been paid for, the suit says, adding that Mr. Pelle did not receive a response. "Upon information, Gregory Rhymer and other management employees were involved in this illegal transfer," the lawsuit reads.

In a release issued today, Mr. Kupfer pushed back against the allegation. He said an emergency request was made by the BVI to WAPA for poles, pole hardware, and wire for their distribution system which had been impacted by Hurricanes Irma and Maria. The release goes on to say that "based on all information that has been gathered," the materials shipped to the BVI was owned by WAPA.

"This was a case where a sister utility reached out for assistance in the worst of times. The leadership of WAPA at the time thought it prudent to assist citizens in the BVI in their greatest time of need," Mr. Kupfer said. The WAPA chief executive pointed out that the FEMA reimbursement process requires that materials and services be purchased upfront by WAPA and reimbursement sought thereafter. The materials, notwithstanding that they are eligible to be reimbursed by FEMA, remain the property of WAPA, he said.

In essence, Mr. Kupfer is saying that though FEMA would still be the federal agency paying for the materials via reimbursement, the materials, he contends, would still remain the property of WAPA.

Mr. Kupfer added that the exchange or purchase of materials is not an unusual practice in the utility industry. "This is not the first time that WAPA has assisted a fellow utility or received assistance during its recovery. Power companies not only exchange materials, manpower is also frequently provided to assist restoration efforts. Just recently, WAPA provided excess electrical equipment to Saipan in the aftermath of a major typhoon, and in past years, WAPA personnel have gone as far as Guam to provide restoration and recovery assistance," he said.

Mr. Kupfer, however, did not address why Mr. Pelle, who served as chief administration officer, did not receive an answer when, according to the suit, he asked why the materials were being shipped to the BVI, and whether they had been paid for. The Consortium has requested documentation from WAPA confirming that the BVI government received the materials, documents showing that the BVI government paid for the materials, and a list showing all the materials that were shipped.

"Although WAPA's practice is to address such allegations in the proper forum, it was determined in this instance that a limited response to these particularly misleading characterizations of events was warranted," Mr. Kupfer said in the WAPA release.

The Consortium story, titled "WAPA Management Illegally Shipped FEMA-Provided Restoration Materials and Supplies to British Virgin Islands, Whistleblower Lawsuit Says", can be read [here](#).