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Saharan Dust Event to Impact USVI and Puerto Rico, Public Health Advisory Issued

A moderate to severe Saharan dust plume is set to impact Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands starting December 24, bringing hazy skies, reduced visibility, and potential health risks. The event will peak on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day

Community Center / **Published On December 23, 2024 08:48 PM /**

Staff Consortium **December 23, 2024**

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A plume of Saharan dust is expected to move into Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands beginning on Tuesday, December 24, according to the National Weather Service (NWS) in San Juan. The event, classified as moderate to severe, is forecasted to peak from Tuesday afternoon into the overnight hours, with effects lingering through Christmas Day before tapering off by Wednesday afternoon.

Saharan dust consists of mineral particles originating from the Sahara and Sahel deserts in Africa. These particles are carried by trade winds across the Atlantic Ocean, traveling over 5,000 kilometers to reach the Caribbean, including Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands. While this natural phenomenon serves as a fertilizer for marine and terrestrial ecosystems, it poses health risks, particularly to vulnerable populations.

Saharan dust can exacerbate conditions in individuals who are immunocompromised, sensitive, or suffer from respiratory illnesses. Scientists have noted increases in respiratory issues during Saharan dust events.

Common symptoms associated with exposure include:

- Nose and throat irritation
- Sinusitis
- Eye and skin irritation
- Allergies
- Asthma exacerbation
- Acute bronchitis
- Risk of respiratory infections

Public Health Recommendations

To minimize health risks, residents are advised to:

- Keep necessary medications readily available.
- Stay hydrated and wear light clothing.
- Avoid outdoor activities during peak dust concentrations.
- Use face masks and protective eyewear when outdoors.

Residents of Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands should prepare for hazy skies, reduced visibility, and potential respiratory issues. Christmas Eve and Christmas Day will be particularly affected, with peak dust concentrations expected overnight on Tuesday and gradually diminishing by Wednesday afternoon.

Authorities urge individuals to follow public health recommendations and monitor updates from local agencies.