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Cruise Lines Pull the Plug on Ocean Travel for the Next 30 Days as Coronavirus Pandemic Devastates Tourism

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Three Cruise Ships docked at the West Indian Company Port in Charlotte Amalie, St. Thomas in December 2015. By. ERNICE GILBERT/ VI CONSORTIUM

The territory's fragile tourism industry took a major hit on Friday as the Cruise Lines International Association (CLIA) announced its major ocean-going cruise lines are suspending operations from U.S. ports of call for 30 days in response to the spread of coronavirus (COVID-19).

The major cruise lines temporarily halting operations so far include Carnival, Royal Caribbean, Norwegian, and MSC -- all of whom called on the Virgin Islands with weekly stops at the WICO and Crown Bay docks on St. Thomas.

In March and April, alone, a total of 92 ship calls with a capacity of more than 275,000 passengers were scheduled to pass through St. Thomas, with an occasional ship calling on St. Croix.

Department of Health Officials — several hours after a brief conference held by Governor Bryan to announce his administration's effort to combat the pathogen — announced that the first case of coronavirus had been confirmed. The Consortium later learned that the case is on St. Croix, but no specific information about the patient was provided, in order to protect the person's privacy.

Gov. Albert Bryan said on Friday morning that a rough economic path lay ahead, just as the territory's tourism industry showed signs of recovery from hurricanes Irma and Maria in 2017.

"The economic impact of this on our community is going to be long-felt and it's going to be hard. Right away, the president is looking to delay the April 15th deadline [to file taxes]. That immediately affects the cash-flow to the Virgin Islands Government. The cruise ships have stopped coming, which affects our tourism dollars. Flights are down; so far we've been holding steady on hotel reservations. But this is of grave concern to a tourism economy like ours. There's no indication at this point how long this is going to last, so we're doing things on the government side now to reduce spending and look at a conservative approach moving forward, because we have some very rough days ahead — not only health-wise, but economically.

"How we're going to do the things that we are obligated to do by our budget and how do we get those revenues in. How do we make sure that all these people who are going to have to work overtime to handle the situation in our community remain paid. How do all those people in the private sector who are working for businesses that have been impacted heavily by the downturn in tourism make out. Those are conversations we are having all the time. We assure the public that we are looking into every which way to find relief for our territory moving forward," Mr. Bryan said.