Governor Bryan Warns Maritime Fees Pose Outsized and Harmful Impact on USVI’s Very Survival

In a letter to the U.S. Trade Representative, Governor Bryan warns that with over 95% of essentials imported by sea, the proposed $1.5M fee on Chinese-built ships could raise shipping costs by 250%, causing catastrophic economic repercussions for the USVI

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Governor Albert Bryan Jr. on Thursday formally appealed to the Office of the United States Trade Representative (USTR), urging federal officials to reconsider the impact of a proposed maritime policy that he says could cause significant harm to the U.S. Virgin Islands.

The proposed federal rule would impose service fees of up to $1.5 million on Chinese-built vessels entering U.S. ports. Governor Bryan says while he supports national efforts to bolster

American maritime interests and reduce reliance on Chinese manufacturing, he cautioned that the U.S. Virgin Islands faces unique economic and logistical vulnerabilities that make the territory especially susceptible to unintended consequences from the proposed measure.

“We applaud the administration’s America First Trade Policy and the effort to protect domestic industries,” Governor Bryan wrote in a letter addressed to Ambassador Jamieson Greer. “However, as an island territory that relies on maritime resupply for our very survival, we must call attention to the outsized and harmful impact this policy would have on our people.”

The governor's concerns stem from the territory’s heavy reliance on imported goods—over 95% of food, medicine, construction materials, and other essentials are shipped into the Virgin Islands. Most of these imports come from Florida ports aboard smaller, shallow-draft ships that are uniquely suited to local port conditions. Many of these vessels are Chinese-built and, according to the governor, cannot be easily or quickly replaced.

Under the proposed rule, these smaller ships could face per-container fees of up to $3,750 per twenty-foot equivalent unit (TEU), while ultra-large Chinese-operated carriers would pay only $65 per TEU. Governor Bryan warned that this discrepancy could drive up shipping costs for Virgin Islanders by as much as 250%, drastically inflating the price of basic necessities in an already high-cost region.

“These proposed exemptions are not only consistent with the spirit and intent of the rule, but they are necessary to prevent catastrophic economic repercussions for the 87,000 Americans living in the U.S. Virgin Islands,” Governor Bryan stated.

To alleviate the potential burden on the territory, the governor proposed two targeted exemptions:

1. Exempt Small, Near-Shore Vessels: Vessels under 1,100 TEU and 21,000 deadweight tonnage that serve short-haul routes between the mainland United States and the Virgin Islands.

2. Exempt Near-Shore Caribbean Voyages: Routes between U.S. ports and those within the Caribbean Basin Economic Recovery Act (CBERA) area, which Governor Bryan argues should not be considered “international maritime transport.”

He stressed that U.S.-to-U.S. voyages within this regional framework should be recognized as domestic routes and treated accordingly under federal trade rules.

Governor Bryan also affirmed his willingness to collaborate with the USTR to develop trade policies that advance national goals without penalizing U.S. territories.