

The Virgin Islands Consortium

“We Can’t Keep Up”: WAPA Turns to Public for Help as Vegetation Threatens Power Lines

With just weeks until the 2025 hurricane season begins, lawmakers criticize WAPA’s slow vegetation management response, warning that overgrown brush around power lines poses serious risks amid limited crews, training delays, and private lot issues.

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Dept. of Public Works employees trim vegetation and clear the Queen Mary Highway in Barren Spot area following TS Ernesto in August 2024. By. ERNICE GILBERT, V.I. CONSORTIUM.

With the 2025 Atlantic Hurricane Season fast approaching, lawmakers have encouraged the Water and Power Authority to rid electrical lines of overgrown vegetation that could create hazards during rainy and windy conditions.

WAPA CEO Karl Knight appeared before the Committee on Housing, Transportation, and Telecommunications on Wednesday. There, Senator Carla Joseph asked whether the authority is “planning any cutting of any of the foliage that we have that is really intertwining with our above-ground wiring.”

A less diplomatic Senator Dwayne DeGraff also chided the authority about its perceived lack of action ahead of the hurricane season. “If you would come and bring the bucket truck for me, I’ll cut the trees myself because it’s not being done,” he stated.

WAPA, said Mr. Knight, carries out routine “vegetation management” and is “beefing up our capacity to do so by trying to redevelop dedicated tree trimming vegetation management crews within the authority.” He provided an example from a recent outage on Feeder 13. “There was some extensive vegetation that we had to clear... for that feeder, and our line workers did that.” Additionally, WAPA is “re-engaging with outside contractors to support us in that effort as well,” Mr. Knight indicated.

Plans to provide training on vegetation management were discussed in a previous hearing, recalled committee chair Senator Marvin Blyden. In that regard, “we are not where we want to be,” responded Mr. Knight. “We’ve identified the trainer, we’ve started to even identify the personnel that we want to have trained, but we are trying to secure some grant funding that is coming through the Virgin Islands Energy Office.” Blyden was not satisfied with his response, asking “what’s going to be done in the interim?”

Absent the specialist crews, WAPA’s line workers have been tasked with the responsibility of clearing utility poles of vegetation. “It’s not the best use of their time and skills, so we are trying to supplement and augment them,” Mr. Knight told lawmakers. He issued a public appeal to private property owners who fail to trim brush or trees. “Most of the time, our issues are on privately owned lots. Please do what you can to assist us.”

“We do clear lines. We have to. We have no choice. We just don’t have the capacity to keep up with the level of vegetation growth that we’re experiencing right now in the territory,” Mr. Knight lamented.