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Bill Recognizing U.S. Republican Senator for Critical Role in Permanent Rum Cover-Over For USVI Clears First Hurdle

Bill 36-0208 advanced after testimony highlighted Mike Crapo's major involvement in securing the permanent extension of the rum cover-over rate, with supporters citing economic stability.

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Republican U.S. Senator Mike Crapo, who lawmakers credited for his role in securing the permanent rum cover-over rate.

A resolution recognizing Republican U.S. Senator Mike Crapo for his role in securing a permanent increase to the rum cover-over tax reimbursements has advanced out of committee, clearing its first legislative step in the Virgin Islands Senate. Bill 36-0208, introduced on Tuesday

by Senator Avery Lewis, seeks to formally acknowledge what lawmakers described as the Idaho senator's support in ensuring the rate remained at \$13.25.

Senator Lewis, who chairs the Committee on Government Operations, Veterans Affairs and Consumer Protection, told colleagues that Senator Crapo played an "instrumental role leading the bipartisan effort to secure the permanent extension of the rum cover over at the \$13.25 rate of taxation." He said the increase "will not only secure the retirement for thousands of government employees, but will strengthen our economic stability and territorial security." Lewis added that the measure signed by President Donald Trump in July would "provide breathing room for our government and hope for our retirees." Calling the effort "a long struggle over many years," Lewis said Senator Crapo "never wavered" in his support despite representing a state far from the Virgin Islands.

The resolution includes an allocation of \$2,000 to purchase a locally produced item as part of the recognition. Lewis described that provision as "more than a ceremonial gesture," saying it serves as "a cultural expression, a way of sharing a piece of who we are as Virgin Islanders." He said the resolution itself is "our moment of bipartisan unity to say thank you with sincerity."

Testimony in support of the resolution came from several individuals. Government Employees Retirement System Administrator Angel Dawson, in written remarks submitted to the committee, commended Senator Crapo for his work on the territory's behalf. "During these highly polarized political times, I am pleased to add my voice to those recognizing Republican Senator Mike Crapo for his instrumental role in allowing the Virgin Islands of the United States and its leadership to continue maximizing the financial benefits of our longstanding cover over program in that way," Dawson wrote.

Terri Helenese, Governor Albert Bryan Jr.'s representative in Washington, D.C., told lawmakers that "for the first time in more than 50 years, rum cover over funding is permanent, not temporary, not extended, not uncertain." She said the change means "long term fiscal stability that our territory has not seen in generations," noting that every ten years the Virgin Islands and Puerto Rico will receive a combined \$1 billion as a result of the federal action. According to Helenese, the funds "stabilizes pensions, protects retirees, creates jobs, funds public education and health care, and gives our government long-term stability." She said Senator Crapo's involvement went beyond standard legislative advocacy, emphasizing that he traveled to the territory, met with Governor Bryan, and sought to understand local concerns firsthand. She said that when early drafts of President Trump's "Big, Beautiful, Bill" omitted rum cover-over language, Senator Crapo vowed to include it. "This is bipartisan partnership at its finest," she said, adding that his commitment "has been consistent, thoughtful, and genuine. He stands as the greatest champion the Virgin Islands has ever had in the United States Senate."

Lobbyist Kevin Callwood, who is from the Virgin Islands and based in Washington, agreed. "He has done more for us than any other human being on the planet," he said. "He has met with every governor...he has supported every one of our issues." Callwood listed areas in which Senator Crapo provided assistance, including the relocation of Diageo from Puerto Rico to the Virgin Islands and ensuring that the territory was excluded from PROMESA, the federal financial oversight system established for Puerto Rico. "Mike Crapo said he's going to be our Senator, and that's what he's done," Callwood said.

Senators also weighed in with their own reflections. Senator Alma Francis Heyliger said she had "heard him champion for the territory in ways that I haven't seen any other senator do," expressing gratitude but also questioning whether such work should be recognized separately from a senator's

general responsibilities. Senator Angel Bolques Jr. said the territory's reliance on assistance from an Idaho lawmaker underscored the Virgin Islands' lack of full federal representation.

Senator Kenneth Gittens highlighted the bipartisan nature of the effort, saying, "This shows where Democrats and Republicans, regardless of what side of the party lines you're on, can work together to get things done."

Despite an abstention from Senator Francis Heyliger, the committee voted to approve the resolution. Bill 36-0208 now heads to the Committee on Rules and Judiciary for further consideration.

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