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## **WAPA Says Critical Line Powering St. John Was Deliberately Cut, Francis Heyliger Says ‘I’m Going to Call BS on All of This’**

**During a Committee of the Whole hearing, WAPA said it referred the matter to the FBI after concluding the Red Hook-St. John transmission line was cut with a mechanical device, while Senator Alma Francis Heyliger openly challenged that claim.**

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WAPA’s image to lawmakers highlights what the authority identified as burn damage and a cut on the transmission line at the center of the St. John outage investigation. By. V.I. LEGISLATURE/WAPA

The V.I. Water and Power Authority told lawmakers on Thursday that it believes the transmission line between Red Hook and St. John — the critical line that powers all of St. John — was deliberately cut with a mechanical device, prompting a referral to the Federal Bureau of Investigation.

The disclosure, made during a Committee of the Whole meeting on the recent St. Thomas-St. John power crisis, led to broader discussion among senators over whether the damage was truly intentional, how someone could have cut an electrified line without being killed, and whether WAPA has done enough to secure the site and other critical infrastructure from another such incident.

Confirmation of the FBI referral came from WAPA Chief Executive Officer Karl Knight during Thursday's Committee of the Whole meeting convened to examine the recent power crisis in the St. Thomas/St. John district.

Senator Angel Bolques Jr. first asked Mr. Knight whether the matter had been escalated to the FBI. Bolques said his research showed that “willfully damaging or attempting to damage the property of our energy facility, such as an electrical substation, power line, transmission line, is actually a federal offense.” He noted that in some instances, the offense carries a penalty of 5 to 20 years in prison.

Mr. Knight said a local police report had been filed, and indicated that he had suggested the matter be referred to the FBI because the incident constituted a “serious attack on critical infrastructure.”

“This was a criminal act that could be labeled as terrorism against an entire island because electricity was cut to the entire island,” declared Senator Kurt Vialet. Before Mr. Knight formally confirmed that the matter had been referred to the FBI, Vialet warned that failure to do so would be “sending a different message.”

Not all lawmakers were persuaded by WAPA's conclusion. Senator Alma Francis Heyliger said she was “just not buying” that the transmission line had been deliberately cut. WAPA's presentation included a photo of the damaged line, but Senator Francis Heyliger said the tape-wrapped line had been “holding on by a prayer” for “about a year and a half.”

“I'm going to call BS on all of this,” she declared.

Lawmakers also questioned how someone could cut a major electrified cable and avoid being electrocuted. Senator Clifford Joseph posed that question to WAPA's team.

According to Collin Brown, WAPA's director of transmission and distribution, the authority's “protection systems” operate in milliseconds to “minimize destruction to the cable and infrastructure” and also “protects anyone who happens to be inadvertently near a fault.” Based on that, WAPA has theorized that the person responsible may not have been seriously injured by contact with the electrified line.

There were also questions about whether the St. John site, along with other critical WAPA infrastructure, had been adequately secured since the incident.

Mr. Knight, however, was reluctant to discuss that publicly, saying that “it's probably not appropriate to discuss in a public setting.” He said only that WAPA is “taking steps towards securing the site.”

For Senator Bolques, the focus was on preventing a repeat. “It changed a lot of lives over a 72 plus hour period,” he reminded Mr. Knight. He asked that WAPA provide the Legislature with information on security measures.

Maurice Muia, chair of WAPA’s board, said the incident has created an “opportunity to better secure these facilities going forward.”