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U.S. Labor Department Launches Five-Year Maritime Inspection Push in Puerto Rico and USVI

Federal officials say the initiative targets maritime sectors with high injury and illness rates, while employers in Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands are being urged to use free consultation services to identify hazards and strengthen workplace safety.

Economy / **Published On April 16, 2026 07:01 AM /**

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The Crown Bay Cargo Facility. By. TAFARI NELSON, VIPA ENGINEER.

The U.S. Department of Labor is expanding its focus on maritime safety in Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands through a new five-year inspection effort aimed at some of the region's highest-risk waterfront industries.

Announced Wednesday, the initiative establishes programmed inspections for maritime operations working on or adjacent to U.S. navigable waterways, with the stated goal of strengthening safety and health protections for workers in Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands.

According to the U.S. D.O.L., the inspections will cover employers involved in shipbuilding and repair, boat building, marine cargo handling, shipping navigation services, port and harbor operations, support activities for water transportation, and marinas that conduct recreational boat repair. Federal officials said the initiative was developed in response to persistently high injury and illness rates in maritime industries.

The enforcement plan is structured as a Local Emphasis Program, a type of OSHA directive used to focus inspections on industries or hazards with elevated risks. The new maritime directive lays out a five-year inspection framework for sectors operating on or near waterways traveled by boats and ships.

The initiative also reflects the way OSHA jurisdiction is divided in the two territories. In Puerto Rico, the territory's OSHA-approved state plan covers most public and private sector employers, but federal OSHA retains authority over maritime employers such as shipyards, marine terminals and longshoring, as well as federal agencies, military facilities and the U.S. Postal Service. In the Virgin Islands, federal OSHA covers private sector workplaces, including maritime employers, while the Virgin Islands Division of Occupational Safety and Health state plan applies to territorial government agencies and other public-sector workplaces.

At the same time, federal officials are encouraging employers not to view the initiative only as an enforcement effort. The U.S. Department of Labor said businesses in Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands should take advantage of no-cost consultation services available through the Puerto Rico OSHA Consultation Program and the U.S. Virgin Islands' Safety in Paradise OSHA On-Site Consultation Program.

Those consultations are intended to help employers identify hazards, strengthen safety programs and improve compliance before injuries occur. In the Virgin Islands, officials say the service can be used to evaluate safety and health management systems, work practices and environmental hazards, and in some cases employers that make corrective improvements may qualify for a one-year exemption from routine OSHA inspections.