

## Letter to the Editor: Helenese Says Sarauw Is “Ill-Informed and Unfit for Congress” Over Rum Cover-Over Comments

In a Letter to the Editor, Teri Helenese argues that Janelle Sarauw’s criticism of permanent rum cover-over legislation misunderstands federal tax policy, congressional relationships, and the value of securing the \$13.25 rate for territory.

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Candidate for Congress Teri Helenese

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Congressional candidate Janelle Sarauw says that “Rum Cover-Over legislation is a poor and lazy policy solution.” She said that she “vehemently disagrees” with receiving \$1 billion permanently over decades. You heard it from the horse’s own mouth on June 9th on Reef Broadcasting and can read it below.

“So, for the retirees that are listening and those that are vested in the retirement system, you know, my generation, ahm, to be exact, and those who are really receiving retirement checks now, there is celebration, ahm, that we literally just received the permanent rum cover-over right, and that’s something that I vehemently disagree with. I think it was a poor and lazy policy solution that we pursued on behalf of the government and our paid lobbyist in Washington.”

Janelle would like the rum cover-over per proof-gallon rate to be \$20.00 or \$22.00, based on inflation between 1999 and 2026. I would like that, too. Every Virgin Islander would like that, but that’s not how tax policy works. Janelle’s comments on rum cover-over demonstrate that she does not make informed decisions and is unfit to be the next Delegate to Congress. Congress will not increase taxes on rum without increasing taxes on all spirits, and it’s a pipe dream to believe that Congress will. Janelle’s position is misleading, not informed, and reckless.

The facts tell the truth.

When Charles Turnbull was Governor, and Congress increased the rum cover-over rate to \$13.25 per proof-gallon, that increase was temporary. It was never made permanent law. Whenever Congress failed to renew the Tax Extenders package, the rate automatically reverted to \$10.50. That is exactly what happened when the provision expired on December 31, 2021, when Congress did not act on any tax extender, not just rum cover-over. So, for Janelle to say there should be no celebration now because the rate was \$13.25 under Governor Turnbull in 1999, exposes her recklessness and naivete about how Congress works. Janelle did not research, and does not understand, that the \$13.25 rate under Governor Turnbull was never permanent.

For decades, the Virgin Islands found itself returning to Washington time and again to fight for funding that supports our government, protects our retirees, and strengthens our economy. Every year brought uncertainty. Every year required another struggle.

That is why permanency matters.

The objective was never simply to secure another short-term extension. The objective was to permanently protect this critical source of funding so future generations would not have to return to Congress year after year seeking renewal.

That objective was achieved because relationships matter.

For more than two decades, the Congressional Outreach Program and leaders from the Virgin Islands and Puerto Rico worked tirelessly to build trust, credibility, and bipartisan support among key members of Congress. More than 20 years ago, Senator Mike Crapo visited the Virgin Islands, told Governor Turnbull that he would be a US Senator for the

Virgin Islands, and became one of our strongest advocates in the United States Senate. Those relationships were nurtured over many years, long before anyone knew he would one day become Chairman of the Senate Finance Committee.

As a territory with a voice but no vote on the floor of Congress, the Virgin Islands has always relied on relationships, respect, and coalition building to advance its interests. Those efforts ultimately led Senator Crapo to champion legislation that permanently secured the \$13.25 Rum Cover-Over rate. That achievement will provide approximately \$1 billion in funding for the Virgin Islands and Puerto Rico over the coming decades while bringing long-term certainty to our government, our retirees, and our economy.

That matters.

Senator Crapo was under no obligation to include this provision in the legislation. He did so because he understood its importance and because years of trust and partnership made that understanding possible.

For Janelle to dismiss this accomplishment as “poor and lazy policy” is not only reckless, but it also overlooks the decades of work invested by countless individuals on behalf of both the Virgin Islands and Puerto Rico.

Janelle dismisses the efforts of Congresswoman Jennifer González Colón and her staff, who spent years advancing Rum Cover-Over legislation and advocating for permanency. Janelle dismisses the work of Congresswoman Stacey Plaskett and her staff, who partnered with González Colón in the House on legislation to permanently secure the \$13.25 rate. Janelle dismisses the efforts of Governor Albert Bryan Jr., Governor Pedro Pierluisi, the Rum Cover-Over Working Group, federal advocates, industry partners, the Congressional Outreach Program, and many others who spent years educating members of Congress about why this funding is essential to the Virgin Islands.

Most importantly, Janelle dismisses a historic bipartisan accomplishment that changed the financial trajectory of the Virgin Islands.

The lesson is simple. Results matter, and relationships produce results. The people of the Virgin Islands deserve a Delegate who understands both.

Unfortunately, much of the criticism being offered by Janelle reflects a misunderstanding of how Congress actually works. The Virgin Islands does not have a vote in Congress. Success requires credibility and the ability to build lasting relationships across Democratic and Republican party lines.

Before dismissing the work that made permanency possible, it would be worthwhile for Janelle to consider the perspectives of those who dedicated years to this effort, including Governor Jennifer González of Puerto Rico, Governor Albert Bryan Jr., Kevin Callwood, former Governor of Puerto Rico Pedro Pierluisi, Congresswoman Stacey Plaskett, Senator Crapo, Co-Sponsors, Senator Kristin Gillibrand (D-NY) Senator Roger Wicker (R-MS), Senator Bill Cassidy (R-LA), Senator Ruben Gallego (D-AZ), approximately 30 House Co-Sponsors, Diageo, Captain Morgan Rum, Cruzan Rum, Sazerac, Bacardi, other industry stakeholders, and the many federal advocates who helped bring this achievement across the finish line.

What is most concerning is the willingness to criticize the very people who have stood beside the Virgin Islands for years. Strong allies in Washington should not be taken for granted. They are earned through trust, respect, gratitude, and consistent engagement.

The role of a Delegate to Congress is not simply to make headlines. It is to build bridges, strengthen alliances, and create opportunities for the people they represent. Because the Virgin Islands lacks a vote in Congress, relationships are our most valuable currency.

That reality requires maturity, discipline, and an understanding of how progress is achieved in Washington.

It is also important to recognize that Rum Cover-Over policy does not exist in isolation. Changes to the rate involve broader federal tax policy affecting the distilled spirits industry as a whole. Any proposal to significantly increase the rate must be evaluated within that larger framework.

While everyone would welcome additional revenue for the Virgin Islands, serious public policy requires more than wishful thinking and rhetoric. It requires realistic proposals, careful planning, and a clear understanding of the legislative process.

The stakes for the Virgin Islands are too high for political rhetoric disconnected from reality. Our future depends on leaders who can earn respect, build coalitions, and deliver meaningful results.

This is a moment that calls for experience, steady judgment, and a commitment to facts over slogans. The people of the Virgin Islands deserve leadership that understands the value of relationships, appreciates the importance of bipartisan cooperation, and remains focused on securing real outcomes for the territory.

The future of the Virgin Islands deserves nothing less.

Virgin Islanders, there is one simple equation we should all understand when discussing the Rum Cover-Over Tax.

Current Permanent Rum Cover-Over Rate at \$13.25:  
Contribution to the Government of the Virgin Islands and Puerto Rico: Approximately \$1 billion over the coming decades.

Janelle Sarauw's Proposed Rum Cover-Over Theory:  
Contribution to the Government of the Virgin Islands: \$0 over the coming decades as she vehemently disagrees with the rate of \$13.25 per proof gallon and characterizes it as "a poor and lazy policy solution."

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The fact is that if Janelle had been in Washington and advocated for what she claims would be a better solution, the territory would still be stuck at the lower, lapsed \$10.50 rate with no permanency.

The math is simple.

A proposal that becomes law can generate real revenue for the Virgin Islands.

A proposal that never becomes law generates nothing.

The law of multiplication remains undefeated: Zero multiplied by any number equals zero.

The choice is between a permanent funding source that delivers real dollars to the Virgin Islands and a theoretical proposal that delivers none. Results matter. Outcomes matter. Reality matters.

At a time when the Virgin Islands needs a Delegate who can walk into any office on Capitol Hill and be recognized as a trusted partner, we cannot afford to send someone who is still learning how Washington works. The Virgin Islands needs results over rhetoric. The stakes are too high, and the people of this territory deserve leadership that is ready from day one.

— Teri Helenese, Rum Cover-Over Working Group Lead and Candidate for Delegate to Congress of the US Virgin Islands

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