

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Six Passenger Exemption Joint Bill Passes Full Congress

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The United States Senate passed federal legislation that includes the Virgin Islands Six Passenger exemption in a unanimous vote on Wednesday night. Last week, the House of Representatives passed the same legislation, which represents a move toward the territory regaining its presence in the yachting industry, with an overwhelming vote of 413-3.

The announcement of the legislation's passage by Congress came in a press release issued by Government House on Thursday afternoon, where Gov. de Jongh explained that a previous version of the Six Pack bill had passed the House in September, but that the new bill, "H.R. 5769, is a result of a joint conference which emerged from both the

House and the Senate and is en route to the President for his signature."

A second House vote on the new Senate language also took place later Wednesday night in order to ensure that the final House language was identical to what passed the Senate.

The Governor said the new legislation was "a critical first step in our journey to regain our position as the world's leader in this important industry sector" and that it should prompt the government and marine industry to arrive at creative ways to "inspire young people to venture into this great new world."

Prior to 1993, when the six-passenger or "six pack" limitation on U.S. uninspected vessels was imposed, the territory's harbors were populated with large numbers of chartered yachts that brought "millions in jobs and annual revenue to the local economy," the press release said. However, the limit to vessels carrying only six passengers in the territory's waters saw the industry move to the British Virgin Islands, which follows international standards and has a twelve-passenger limitation.

Governor de Jongh praised the efforts of Senator Jay Rockefeller and Rep. Bill Shuster, who were instrumental in bringing the legislation to a vote.

"We are grateful to both the members of the House of Representatives and U.S. Senate for voting to take this action, which levels the playing field for the territory," de Jongh said. "And enough cannot be said about the efforts of Senator Jay Rockefeller of West Virginia, a Lion of the Senate and the Chairman of the Senate Commerce, Science and Transportation Committee.

"Senator Rockefeller has distinguished himself as our leading Democratic champion in the Senate. As a member of the Senate Finance Committee, he became the center of the U.S.V.I. defense against a vigorous and unrelenting attack from anti-change forces within Puerto Rico and in the U.S. Senate. He has been the leading defender of rum tax extenders. There is a strong argument that the territory would not have been successful in our fight to develop our rum industry if Jay Rockefeller was not the visible champion for the territory's economy. As a committed friend of the U.S. Virgin Islands, it is only fitting that one of his final legislative achievements would benefit our territory," de Jongh said Thursday.

After nearly three decades in the U.S. Senate, Sen. Rockefeller will retire when his term ends this year.

Image Credit: Charterworld