

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Hugo Hodge Still Under Fire For Hiring Practices At WAPA's Propane Conversion Site

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Cynthia Graham **February 12, 2015**



Propane tanks arrive at WAPA

Hugo Hodge, Jr., executive director of the Virgin Islands Water and Power Authority, has come under fire from members of the Senate for employee complaints and recently published reports from *VI Consortium* about unfair hiring practices at WAPA's propane conversion facility being constructed in Estate Diamond in Christiansted.

Hodge issued a statement this week defending the project's lead contractor, VITOL, and its subcontractors.

The statement said Hodge "sought to clarify allegations that VITOL, WAPA's contractor for the propane conversion project, and its subcontractors are not adhering to the letter of the law as it relates to the hiring of workers for the projects underway on St. Thomas and St. Croix."

It noted that "two senators have gone public" about VITOL subcontractors "importing skilled workers to the territory and bypassing local hires." Sen. Nellie O'Reilly has openly voiced her concerns about hiring practices at the site, due to a significant amount of complaints her office received from local workers.

On Monday, Hodge, responding to a public statement made about the matter, distanced WAPA from the hiring at the site, as he did when *VI Consortium* questioned him last month.

"VITOL is obligated by its contract with the Authority to follow, and to ensure that its subcontractors follow, the laws of the Virgin Islands, to include hiring requirements as mandated by law," he said.

Hodge said that VITOL has posted its vacancies with the Department of Labor and only when those vacancies cannot be filled locally with qualified workers that the company seeks to recruit workers from other jurisdictions.

"This is what the law provides for, that the jobs be posted and where the qualified personnel exist, the positions be filled," he said. "But unlike other non-U.S. jurisdictions where governments can impose requirements on hiring of locals only, we are part of the United States and as such, must follow the laws that require that we do not discriminate in the hiring of U.S. residents for these types of projects."

Hodge added that those wishing to be employed by any of WAPA's contractors should visit the Department of Labor.

"I would strongly recommend that persons seeking to be employed by VITOL or its subcontractors take note of the filings at the Department of Labor and follow the process to be interviewed, and where necessary, tested, to determine qualifications for the various positions available," he said, adding, "It is easy to cry foul about the hiring practices of a company without full knowledge of the extent to which the company is trying to hire locally."

He continued, "The company is posting its vacancies, if Virgin Islanders are not responding to those posts or cannot prove their qualifications for the specific jobs, VITOL and its subcontractors cannot be faulted for looking beyond the shores of the Virgin Islands to identify a pool of workers to complete these time-sensitive projects in the two districts."

Controversy began brewing at the work site on St. Croix soon after the project got underway last June. Local workers have [voiced complaints](#) of an influx of imported workers, mainly from Puerto Rico, being brought in to fill many of the positions at the plant. They say local, skilled workers are being turned away or even fired from the work site in favor of lesser-skilled, imported workers.

In addition, local workers say the site presents unsanitary and unsafe working conditions, some saying they have been subjected to [use homemade tools](#) to complete tasks, among other problems.

The *VI Consortium* has issued numerous email requests to WAPA for a breakdown of the numbers of local workers versus imported workers at the site. The requests have gone unanswered. Hodge did, however, [respond to other questions](#) posed by *VI Consortium* last month regarding this matter.

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