

The Virgin Islands Consortium

EPA May Takeover Some V.I. Environmental Programs In 2016

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ST. THOMAS – U.S. Environmental Protection Agency officials might take control of some mismanaged Virgin Islands environmental programs that allowed issues such as bacteria-infected drinking water, a watchdog group reported.

The territory for years has neglected duties required by its millions of dollars in grants, such as monitoring water and air quality and enforcing regulations, [according to the EPA inspector general](#). The federal agency awarded \$4.6 million to carry out such duties through 2014.

If Virgin Islands officials don't improve their management, the EPA could take over any programs required by the Clean Water Act as early as March 2016.

The Virgin Islands "has not effectively implemented several environmental programs which can result in increased risk to the public and the environment from environmental pollutants," the EPA inspector general said.

In March, a Delaware family of four was poisoned indoors by the toxic pesticide methyl bromide at a luxury St. John resort – a fumigant that is strictly to be used outdoors – today their two children remain in a coma.

The EPA inspector general said samples weren't tested at one publicly-owned drinking water utility (the Virgin Islands Water and Power Authority) until the EPA reported water discoloration and low amounts of chlorine in March 2014. Eight of the ten sites sampled down the water distribution line tested positive for fecal coliform bacteria, which can cause diseases such as typhoid, Hepatitis A, and cholera.

The Department of Planning and Natural Resources Commissioner at the time, Alicia Barnes, created an EPA-approved corrective plan, but the EPA inspector general said it remained concerned that Virgin Islands test results might have been altered. Barnes announced her resignation through a Government House spokesman suddenly and without explanation in July 2014.

Seventeen years of water quality data showed no other instances of bacterial infection, which "raises questions about the validity of the historical record," the report said. Also, the sites where bacteria was found were not subsequently routinely monitored.

"As a result, the EPA, the water utility and the public do not know whether the bacteria results indicate a serious human health risk in the drinking water on St. Thomas," the EPA inspector general said.

Investigators also reported that nearly half of the required quality tests on fishing and swimming water weren't taken from 2007 to 2013.

Consequently, the EPA could have listed the Virgin Islands as non-compliant – which would have revoked funding – when the problem was identified in 2010. Instead the federal agency opted to fund and manage a contractor to perform the testing.

Other program mismanagement included poor underground pipe inspections, insufficiently-trained inspectors and various facilities going unpunished for major environmental regulations violations.

Investigators also found that a lack of money was a major cause of the Virgin Islands' environmental management deficiencies.

However, those money issues could be alleviated if the territory would update its financial system to comply with federal requirements. Until then, the EPA will withhold \$37 million the Virgin Islands has accumulated in grants.

The inspector general also noted that the federal environmental agency EPA should have caught how the Virgin Islands' mismanaged programs.

The EPA will give DPNR until March 2016 to improve its management under stricter oversight before deciding if it will take over its Clean Water Act programs.

[\[EPA podcast\]](#)

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