

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Residents Living Near St. Croix Renaissance Site Say Red Mud Making Them Sick; DPNR To Take Enforcement Action

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ST. CROIX -- The Department of Planning and Natural Resources held a community meeting last Thursday at UVI's Great Hall on the Albert A. Sheen Campus here, to hear from members of the Estate New Works, Profit and Bethlehem communities about the impact that the red mud remediation project, which commenced in April, 2014, was having on their daily lives.

The Consortium in February [documented complaints](#) residents made at a similar DPNR meeting, however it was conducted before Commissioner Dawn Henry's tenure.

Henry noted that in the past three years, attempts made to address the red mud problem on the St. Croix Renaissance site have failed. Attempts included placing top soil over the red mud in hopes that vegetation would take hold; and the construction of gabion walls to prevent erosion and thereby mitigating red mud runoff during heavy rain.

The latest effort, however, which Henry said is "the most comprehensive and employs the best methodologies," -- including the conversion of the area to a mixed-use industrial-commercial site, and the reduction of red mud on the piles, among other efforts, was



Members of the Estate New Works,

Profit and Bethlehem communities at UVI's Great Hall for a meeting conducted by DPNR.

But community members gathered at the Great Hall had complaints that went beyond the effects of the red dust, though it remained the main focus. Frustrated residents spoke of their communities being neglected for years by the government, and only being remembered when politicians run for office. And they said their efforts to reach out to DPNR in the past have either fallen on death ears, or promises made were never kept.

The residents, most of them of Latin descent, expressed suspicion that their communities were being regarded as a "dumping site," and that there was little regard for their well-being.

We are stepping up tonight by committing to you that we are going to move forward with enforcement action. - DPNR Commissioner Dawn Henry.

A woman who was part of those listed as testifiers, said her daughter, 15, had developed pneumonia. She said for years her children have had to bath in water contaminated with the red mud made airborne by wind, which then lands on her roof and get mixed with rain water that flows into her cistern.

She went on, revealing that during the campaign season, then-candidate Kenneth Mapp visited her home, and she told him to take his shoes off so that he could feel the red mud underneath his feet. She had cleaned her floor not too long before he arrived.

"When they need your vote, that's when they come out, but once they get your vote, they never help," she said, frustration permeating through her tone. "I have two girls! One that's diabetic and one asthmatic. Who helps me with them? Nobody but my husband. When I carry them for medical attention, who has to pay? My husband's money. When

they bathe, they bathe with the red dust," she protested.

Other complainants told similar stories. They said for years they've been attempting to work with DPNR, but their helping hand had not been accepted. "Nothing is being done," multiple residents said at separate times, they also said the government agency needed to "step up" its enforcement agenda.

Henry, newly appointed by Governor Mapp, did not accept the latter assertion.

"This word stepping up," she began. "We are stepping up. We're stepping up by being here tonight. And we are stepping up tonight by committing to you that we are going to move forward with enforcement action."

"It's not just words. Everything has to have a start." You've got to start someplace, and this is the start," she added.

Henry, from the island of St. Thomas, revealed that she was not aware of the magnitude of difficulty that the residents have had to endure for so many years. She then pointed to recent enforcement action that was taken against this island's rum producers as an example of her office's humorless stance on the matter.

At the end of the meeting, the commissioner said there would be other similar forums as well, and promised to choose a location closer to the affected areas for the next event.

Feature Image: DPNR Commissioner Dawn Henry.

Image Credit: VIC.