

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Rules And Judiciary Committee To Consider Hemp Bill On Monday

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ST. CROIX -- Senator Kenneth Gittens, chairman of the Committee on Rules and Judiciary, has announced a committee hearing scheduled for Monday at 9:30 a.m. at the Earle B. Ottley Legislative Hall on St. Thomas.

The hearing has been scheduled to consider, for advice and consent, nominations sent to the Legislature by Governor Kenneth Mapp and several bills, among them Senator Terrence Nelson's Hemp measure.

In June, members of the Committee on Economic Development, Agriculture and Planning gave the bill its first clearance and forwarded it to Rules and Judiciary. Co-

sponsored by Senators Tregenza Roach and Clifford Graham, the measure seeks amend title 7 of Virgin Islands Code, chapter 1, for the cultivation of hemp and other related purposes.

At the June hearing, Mr. Nelson, while introducing the legislation, said hemp has been used for over 10,000 years, and that it has thousands of industrial uses. The senator said the plant has raised some eyebrows in the territory and some of the U.S. states, "but we are in line with some 22 states that have some form of legislation to allow for the cultivation of hemp."

Invited testifier Carlos Robles, Department of Agriculture commissioner, said while he only had a short time to review the bill, his department is thankful to Mr. Nelson for providing the territory's farmers with another means whereby they could earn a living.

"The diversification of any business provides some level of stability, especially during hard economic times," the commissioner said.

But Mr. Robles expressed some concern with the legislation, stating that DOA currently lacks the manpower, lab space and infrastructure to conduct the required testing and monitoring for THC ([Tetrahydrocannabinol](#)) levels. Robles also highlighted the bill's omission of environmental impact when cultivating hemp, and that the measure makes no mention of funding sources related to the duties mandated for DOA. The commissioner added that DOA presently lacks the capacity to enforce the many provisions of the bill.

DPNR Commissioner Dawn Henry, another invited testifier, said after reading through the measure, DPNR's concerns are few. She said while one of the many benefits of hemp is its ability to thrive under any condition except cold weather, this benefit could turn into a problem if growth spreads uncontrollably to unwanted areas.

In light of the aforementioned, Henry said DPNR's Division of Fish and Wildlife suggests that farmers be required to have a "controlled method plan" to prevent unwanted spreading," and that the department stands ready to help in the reviewing of any such plan.

And Paul Chakroff, who holds bachelor and masters degrees in environmental science, based his testimony on research he conducted on industrial hemp in 2012 while serving as executive director of the St. Croix Environmental Association.

Mr. Chakroff said while hemp remains a low maintenance crop, it requires certain climatic conditions to thrive, and choosing the right locations on St. Croix would be critical for best results. The environmental consultant generally praised the plant, highlighting its many benefits of sustainability and its "green" nature in relation to climate change.

Other agenda items at the Rules and Judiciary hearing will include the vetting of candidates nominated to serve on a government board or commission – "specifically two individuals for the V.I. Taxicab Commission to ensure that they are capable and suitable to carry out the mandates of this commission," Mr. Gittens said. The nominees include Avery Challenger and Joyce Dore-Griffin; both who are being nominated to serve on the V.I. Taxicab Commission.

Later the same day, the committee will vet bill no. 31-0032 - an Act amending Title 5 of the Virgin Islands Code, Chapter 311 - relating to judgments adding subchapter II enacting the Virgin Islands Uniform Collateral Consequences of Conviction Act, which is sponsored by Senator Sammuel Sanes.

“It is important that we continue to vet these nominees and determine their suitability in order to fill these boards and commissions vacancies. Our boards and commissions serve as policy making entities and have oversight of important facets of our community, so those who step up to serve must be ready to get the work done,” Mr. Gittens continued.

The second-term Democrat concluded by stating that if the two bills are successfully approved by the committee he chairs, they will be forwarded to the full body for further consideration.