

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Mapp Signs Nelson's Hemp Bill Into Law

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ST. THOMAS -- Governor Kenneth Mapp signed into law Senator Positive Nelson's hemp bill on Tuesday, according to the governor's [transmittal letter](#) to Senate President Neville James. The bill, after being indefinitely tabled in the Committee on Rules and Judiciary in February, was given a different number and a new lease of life and won the support of most senators at a late March session in the Earl B. Ottley Legislative Hall.

But the bill's reach had been heavily restricted before it could pass the full Senate. It's original intent was to allow for the cultivation of hemp as an industry in the territory, specifically St. Croix. But after dissenters voiced their concerns, chief among them Attorney General Claude Walker, Mr. Nelson was forced to scale back.

The new law is merely an authorization that allows the University of the Virgin Islands and the Department of Agriculture to conduct research to determine the viability of establishing a hemp industry in the territory. The measure also appropriates \$75,000 to D.O.A. for this purpose. According to the new language, the other sections of the bill must wait for the U.S. Congress' approval before any action based on the research's results could be taken.

The bill, now No. 31-0330, was supported by senators Marvin Blyden, Myron Jackson, Clifford Graham, Tregenza Roack, Jean Forde, Kurt Violet, Neville James, Almando "Rocky" Liburd, Mr. Nelson and Sammuel Sanes. Senators Nereida Rivera-O'Reilly, Janet Millin Young, Novelle Francis, Justin Harrigan, Sr. and Kenneth Gittens opposed the measure.

Dissenters had argued that the measure needed to be vetted as changes were made. But those in favor argued that the hemp industry bill had been heard on numerous occasions.

At the March session, Mrs. Millin Young, who chairs the Committee on Economic Development, Agriculture & Planning, would not relent in her opposition. "If there are different things to be discussed [about the new hemp bill], it should be discussed in the committee of jurisdiction," she said. "I'm really big on process, I don't pick on people because of who they are. I believe that I'm consistent in the way that I carry out my business."

Even so, Senator Myron Jackson, who said he had proposed a similar measure in a prior Legislature, said it was time that the territory moved forward, and that the Virgin Islands was lagging behind other Caribbean islands that were speeding into the 21st Century.

"When are we going to sit on our own bottom? We have the ability to grow a product that is sustainable, and that can expand and diversify our economy," Mr. Jackson said. "And as the world is evolving in different aspects, we too will evolve, but it shouldn't be to our demise," he later added.

Senator Nereida Rivera-O'Reilly, who has stringently opposed any measure having to do with marijuana or hemp, said there was no more fight left in her. "The fire in the belly, the desire to be a trailblazer to bring the house down, to inspire, to move people from one position to another, it's gone. It's been gone," Mrs. Rivera-O'Reilly admitted.

Feature Image: Sen. Nelson holds up a small canister containing a liquid form of medicinal marijuana during a May 2015 press conference held at the Curriculum Center located west of the St. Croix Central High School. The senator has said his ultimate goal in regards to marijuana -- he will soon introduce a medicinal marijuana bill to the Senate -- is to see the legalization of marijuana for recreational use in the territory.