

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Territory-Wide Plastic Bag Ban Will Soon Become Law

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ST. THOMAS -- Lawmakers on Tuesday unanimously supported a proposal by Governor Kenneth Mapp (bill sponsored by Senator Nereida Rivera-O'Reilly), to restrict the use of plastic bags in the territory; which the governor hails as a victory in his quest to limit solid waste in the territory.

The governor is expected to sign the measure into law.

The new law will require businesses and organizations to utilize reusable bags, above, or recyclable paper bags with the goal of eliminating plastic bags at point-of sale-checkouts.

"This is a tremendous victory on behalf of public health and the environment," Mr. Mapp said, according to a press release Government House issued Wednesday afternoon. "I

thank senators and all the community members that demonstrated their support for this critical legislation.”

A large percent of all litter consists of plastic bags with many ending up in the territory's waters, where plastic bags can choke sea life, kill corals and end up as chemicals in the islands' food chain. Plastic bags will still be allowed where no acceptable substitute exists such as wrapping prepared foods or meats.

The plastic bag regulations will take effect on January 1, 2017. However, penalties will not be assessed until April 1, 2017 to allow retailers time to make the transition.

The National Resource Defense Council estimates that the average American family takes home more than 1,500 plastic bags each year and millions of these bags now litter the V.I.'s landscapes and pollute its oceans, Government House asserts.

The restriction on plastic bags is [one of three significant solid waste reforms](#) the governor sent down to the Legislature earlier this year. Bills to establish a redemption value on every beverage container sold in the territory and to enforce recycling and the separation of trash are now awaiting consideration by the Rules Committee.

Department of Planning and Natural Resources Commissioner Dawn Henry, who assisted in drafting the solid waste reform bills, has said the bag ban is an essential component in reducing litter and protecting marine life. However, she said, it is critical that the other two solid waste measures are approved in order to fulfill the goal of significantly extending the life of the territory's landfills and keeping bottles and cans off beaches and roadsides.