

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Senators Pass Bill Banning Large-Scale Burning In USVI, Stalling Mapp And FEMA Plans

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ST. THOMAS -- Lawmakers on Friday passed a bill that prohibits large-scale burning of vegetative debris in the U.S. Virgin Islands, a move that goes against the Mapp administration and federal government's plan to incinerate the hundreds of thousands of debris left behind by Hurricanes Irma and Maria.

The bill, whose original intent was to prevent burning of debris as part of cleanup initiatives, was amended by Senator Nereida Rivera-O'Reilly to include large-scale debris caused by disasters.

The measure places on hold Governor Mapp's and the Federal Emergency Management Agency's plan to begin air-curtain incineration in the coming week.

Local environmental groups had lobbied intensively against the plan to burn, and some testified at the Senate on Wednesday about the adverse effects of the option. Their testimony and strong advocacy was enough to convince 10 lawmakers to approve the bill banning burning of debris.

And even if Mr. Mapp were to veto the measure, it could still become law anyway, as a veto override requires two-thirds of the Senate -- approximately 10 lawmakers.

"We are placing the Army Corps of Engineers and FEMA on notice that this territory is a no-burning territory," said Mrs. Rivera-O'Reilly.

With burning of debris about to be banned, the debris would have to be chipped and piled in the territory's landfills, a method, according to Senator Positive Nelson, that comes with its own risk of catching fire.