

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Senators Threaten To Override Potential Veto Of Burning Ban Bill, But Governor Appears To Be One Step Ahead

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Less than a day following Governor Kenneth Mapp's announcement that he would move forward with burning 35 percent of vegetative debris in the territory left behind by Hurricanes Irma and Maria, members of the 32nd Legislature, led by Senate President Myron Jackson, said they would override the governor's veto, were he to take such an action.

"The 32nd Legislature has made its intention clear after hearing the cries from our residents who do not want their health and the environment to be negatively impacted by

the hasty decision to burn our local vegetation. If the governor moves to veto this critical piece of legislation, we will have no choice but to seek an override," Mr. Jackson said in a statement.

The statement follows the Friday passage of a bill during a session at the Earl B. Ottley Legislative Hall, to ban the burning of all debris in the territory. "We are placing the Army Corps of Engineers and FEMA on notice that this territory is a no-burning territory," said Senator Nereida Rivera-O'Reilly during the session.

Local environmental groups had lobbied intensively against the plan to burn, and some testified at the Senate last 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.

But the governor appears to be ahead of the senators who favor the ban on burning. While senators approved the measure and as of Friday had enough votes to override a veto, no action has been taken by the governor, and he has a ten-day window before he vetoes the bill, which gives him a small window to commence the incineration process without breaking any law. After ten days of no action, the measure becomes law. If Mr. Mapp vetoes the measure, however, say on the tenth day, the action would buy him a little more time before senators meet in another session to override his veto.

And by then, the burning will be in full effect; senators would then have to decide on whether to disrupt a process that is already underway.

During his Monday press briefing, Mr. Mapp said all e-waste, to include metal, will be shipped out of the territory. His decision to burn 35 percent of the debris while chipping and composting the remaining 65 percent, follows recommendations from a group of government officials from four departments called the "Debris Management Team". They include the commissioner of the Department of Planning and Natural Resources, Dawn Henry, the commissioner of the Department of Public Works, Nelson Petty, Jr., the commissioner of the Department of Agriculture, Carlos Robles, and Roger Merritt, Jr., executive director of the Waste Management Authority.

If 65 percent of the debris is not chipped by February, Mr. Mapp said he would move forward with burning an even greater percentage of debris before the March 20, 2017 deadline; the federal government has agreed to cover 100 percent of the cost of debris removal until the aforementioned date. "The people of the Virgin Islands and the treasury of the VI will not be saddled with the bill," the governor said during the press briefing, adding that the government simply does not have the money to absorb the cost.

The governor said mahogany wood would not be burnt or chipped. Instead, he said, the wood will be stored by the government of the Virgin Islands, and later given to artisans. "They are assets, meaning they have value to the government and the people of the Virgin Islands," Mr. Mapp said of the mahogany wood.

Feature Image: Marines cleared tree limbs from roadways across St. Croix after Hurricanes Irma and Maria struck the island in September 2017.

