

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Senators Who Supported Ban On Burning Signal Willingness To Compromise. Their Changing Stance Could Clear Path For Incineration

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ST. CROIX -- At least two senators who spoke with The Consortium during a debris burning demonstration conducted on the south shore of St. Croix on Wednesday, said that they were willing to compromise on a decision to burn some debris in the territory, a move that signaled their willingness to move away from a previously nonnegotiable stance that called for no burning by the government.

The change in position may be received with relief at Government House, as Governor Kenneth Mapp looks to burn some 35 percent of vegetative debris left behind by

Hurricanes Irma and Maria. The governor had seemingly employed a strategy where he'd delay until the last day his veto of the measure calling for no burning, giving his administration and the Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) enough time to at least start the process and place opponents in the Senate in the difficult position of deciding whether to stop an action well underway.

That plan, however, hit a roadblock on Wednesday after USACE told The Consortium that not only had it not received any permits to move forward with air curtain incineration, even if USACE were to receive a permit today, it would take between five to seven days to get the process started. That would be enough time for lawmakers to override the burning in the territory.



Debris in trench is ignited so air curtain

incinerator could send air into the trench to facilitate the burning. (Ernice Gilbert, VIC)

But Senators Novelle Francis and Alicia Hansen told The Consortium during the burning demonstration that they would not immediately support a veto override of the bill. And they went further to state that they would support some burning, with Mrs. Hansen stating that Mr. Mapp should submit his own measure.

"Clearly I understand that we have to be concerned with the type of emissions that will be caused by the burning, and I want to make sure that whatever burning is done, is done in a manner that would be safe to the residents, especially those in the surrounding areas," Mr. Francis said.

He added, "I do understand and condone some limited burning; I want to make that clear. But at the same time we have to choose the area where it's going to be done and make sure that it is not harmful to the population, especially in the surrounding areas."

Mrs. Hansen, who said she has witnessed the health problems caused by debris burning during past hurricanes, committed to supporting some level of burning, although the location and amount will be critical before she could lend her support.

"I do understand that a certain degree of garbage -- not a large amount, not all debris -- that I can support," Mrs. Hansen said, referring to burning. "The governor needs to submit his own bill with the percentages in it and then I will consider that."

Then, she said, "If he submits a veto I am not going to be a part of overriding that veto."

The new position of Mrs. Hansen and Mr. Francis kills any hope of a veto override. Ten votes are needed to achieve the feat, but with the two votes now in question, Senate President Myron Jackson, who was also present at the debris burning demonstration, is now two votes short, as the measure passed late last month with approximately ten votes



Francis.

A CAT-branded excavator loads debris into an

air curtain incinerator on the south shore of St. Croix on Dec. 13, 2017 (Ernice Gilbert, VIC)

Yesterday's burning demonstration was not sanctioned by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) or USACE. And USACE told The Consortium that the demonstration that took place on Wednesday and the results thereof may defer in USACE's method. Before air incineration commences, USACE said it will invite the media and government officials for a demonstration.

The south shore demonstration was conducted by Civil Resource Management Technologies, LLC, with one air curtain incinerator and a trench air curtain incinerator, both of which the company claims are EPA approved. Construction Manager Daniel Salinas explained that the equipment suppresses most of the toxic fumes from the burning and keeps it to the bottom of the incinerators. Trench incineration is a method that sees debris being burnt in a trench dug into the earth, with the incinerator basically providing the air for the burn. Both methods are said to keep most of the toxic fumes at the bottom, while releasing some smoke into the atmosphere.

For Mr. Jackson, however, Wednesday's demonstration did not change his stance. He said there were still plumes of smoke in the atmosphere, and he criticized the lack of necessary gear by employees of the company who were conducting the demonstration. They had on no masks, Mr. Jackson observed, and other critical safety wear such as eye protection. And the senator did not appreciate the apparent burn-all method, where even important wood that could be useful elsewhere were being dumped into fire with the other vegetative debris.

Mr. Jackson also spoke of the myriad of health issues caused by burning; and challenged the governor's continuous mention of the March 20, 2018 deadline, after which Mr. Mapp has argued the local government would have to foot the bill of ridding the territory of the hurricane-related debris. The Senate president contends that just as other deadlines were extended, the debris removal deadline could be extended as well. Mr. Jackson said he would submit his own request for extension if need be.

As for USACE and the regional director of EPA's position that air curtain incineration is safe, Mr. Jackson said he needs more than words; he needs to understand what makes the billowing of smoke into the atmosphere by burning hundreds of thousands of cubic yards of debris safe.

Yet Mr. Jackson may find himself -- along with supporters of the ban on burning -- in a helpless position with the changed stance of two former supporters. Without the votes to override the governor's impending veto, at least 35 percent of the 700,000 cubic yards of vegetative debris currently in the U.S. Virgin Islands will be burned.

Feature Image: Debris being burned in an air curtain incinerator on the south shore of St. Croix on Dec. 13, 2017. The burning was part of a demo by Civil Resource Management Technologies to prove that burning debris can be safe. (Ernice Gilbert, VIC)

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