

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Mapp Vetoes Debris Burning Bill, Saying Senate Has Yet To Offer Viable Alternative

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Debris in trench is ignited so air curtain incinerator could send air into the trench to facilitate the burning. (Ernice Gilbert, VIC)

Governor Kenneth Mapp in a transmittal letter submitted to Senate President Myron Jackson on Thursday, said he has vetoed a bill aimed at banning the burning of debris in the territory by the government, an expected move that Mr. Mapp said is aimed at assuring that the territory would not be left to foot the cost of removing the roughly 700,000 cubic yards of vegetative debris once the March 20, 2018 deadline expires. Before said date arrives, the federal government is responsible for 100 percent of removal costs.

Furthermore, Mr. Mapp contended, the 32nd Legislature, even while submitting a bill aimed at preventing the local government from burning vegetative debris, gave no viable alternative in their proposal. Mr. Mapp's plan calls for the burning of 35 percent, while another 65 percent of the debris would be mulched and composted.

"This is a herculean task and the Legislature has yet to offer a single viable plan on how we should effectively deal with this issue," the governor wrote in the letter to Mr. Jackson outlining his action on the bills recently approved by the body. "Without some incineration, we are unlikely to meet the deadline. I am attempting to make a reasoned decision and remain very concerned about the environment and about the lives and health of the people of the Virgin Islands."

While the Senate was expected to override the bill, the votes needed to accomplish the goal appears lacking. Two senators who previously supported the measure, Senators Novelle Francis and Alicia Hansen, said they would not immediately support an override.

During a [debris burning demonstration on the south shore of St. Croix](#) on Wednesday, Mrs. Hansen and Mr. Francis told The Consortium 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 diminishes 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 -- including those of Mrs. Hansen and Mr. Francis.

For Mr. Jackson, however, the demonstration on the south shore -- which was not conducted by the Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) or the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), nor was it sanctioned by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) -- 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 the Army Corps of Engineers 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.

Feature Image: Debris in trench is ignited so air curtain incinerator could send air into the trench to facilitate the burning. (Ernice Gilbert, VIC)