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FEMA Removes Manual Drawdown Requirement for Federal Disaster Recovery Funds Appropriated to USVI

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Damaged home on St. Croix following Hurricane Maria in 2017. By. IRENE ALI

Governor Albert Bryan and the Office of Disaster Recovery announced Wednesday that the Federal Emergency Management Agency has lifted the manual draw requirement for funds related to Hurricanes Irma and Maria disaster recovery projects.

The announcement is a victory for Mr. Bryan and the O.D.R., which was established by the governor in 2019 to manage and oversee the disaster recovery process and reconcile past recovery-related discrepancies. The manual drawdown of funds has slowed the release of monies appropriated to the USVI for disaster recovery work. In 2017, the U.S. Virgin Islands was devastated by Hurricanes Irma and Maria, leaving all three islands badly damaged. Subsequently,

the federal government poured money into the territory for immediate and longterm recovery work, with total appropriation topping \$8 billion.

According to Government House, as part of the manual drawdown process, the USVI was required to submit funding reimbursement requests to FEMA for approval before gaining authorization to draw funds.

Gov't House said FEMA imposed the manual draw requirement after a 2018 audit found discrepancies with reimbursements filed by the Virgin Islands' Government with FEMA for contract work done in the immediate aftermath of the storms in 2017.

According to the release, since the manual drawdown implementation, O.D.R. has developed robust grants management and administration protocols and practices in accordance with applicable federal laws, regulations, and administrative requirements.

The administration had written a letter to FEMA Regional Administrator Von Essen that sought to provide updates on changes the V.I. government had made relative to FEMA's directive in May 2020 that the G.V.I. implement an internal control plan (ICP) that, if found to be legitimate by FEMA, would lift the manual drawdown of funds process. Mr. Essen responded on Dec. 7 informing Mr. Bryan that the V.I. government [owed the federal government more than \\$134 million](#) resulting from recovery work performed in the USVI, and that the \$134 million debt resulted from "an overall lack of supporting documentation for transactions conducted" by each of the applicants, as well as limited cases of ineligibility.

On Wednesday, Adriene Williams-Octalien, O.D.R. director, said FEMA's decision to lift the manual draw requirement was a testament to O.D.R.'s diligence.

"The Office of Disaster Recovery has demonstrated the capacity and laid the foundation to ensure that the territory manages federal funds correctly," Mrs. Williams-Octalien said. "FEMA's decision to lift this requirement is a testament to the hard work of our staff and their continued pledge to develop the capacity and processes to maintain an accurate accounting of recovery dollars."

The territory's leader said Monday that the latest development was another step forward in his administration's efforts to continue and, in many instances, correct and expedite the territory's post-hurricanes Irma and Maria recovery and rebuilding.

"This indicates the diligence of the Office of Disaster Recovery and our administration's efforts to get our recovery on the right track," Mr. Bryan said. "It was a long road toward accountability, but the clean-up and the additional protocols that have been put in place are now bearing fruit for the people of the Virgin Islands. Now that we don't have to abide by those restrictions, we can process payments and move projects more quickly."

According to the release, FEMA's decision came in the form of a January 29 letter informing the Government of the Virgin Islands that the agency had completed its assessment of the GVI's progress in responding to the Notice of Potential Debt Letter issued to the territory on December 15, 2020.

In the letter, FEMA noted that the O.D.R. made substantial progress in providing supporting documentation in defense of the potential debt and that its responsiveness in conjunction with the approved ICP led to the decision to lift the manual drawdown process currently in place. Mr. Bryan said territory will continue to coordinate with FEMA to ensure compliance with all federal

guidelines and standards.

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