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# Legislature Advances Bill to Incentivize Removal of Invasive Species; Senators Voice Displeasure With Key Testifier's Absence

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Kyle Murphy **March 23, 2021**

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**The Boa Constrictor is a large snake that can reach lengths of 3–13 feet. The snake mainly evolved from South America and is widely used as pets. By. GETTY IMAGES**

A bill that would pay Virgin Islanders \$100 for each large, invasive snake captured by creating a special program funded with \$10,000 was approved in the Committee of Economic Development and Agriculture on Monday, and will be forwarded to the Committee on Rules and Judiciary for further vetting.

Bill No. 34-0023 establishes the Invasive Species Eradication Community Program Fund and an imprest account fund for the payment of bounties under the program. The \$10,000 would be

appropriated from the Animal Fund.

According to bill sponsor Senator Kenneth Gittens, the measure's main intent is to address the rise of the invasive species of snakes on St. Croix, however the bill is also inclusive of all invasive species.

Nicole Angeli, director of the Dept. of Planning and Natural Resources' Fish and Wildlife Division, shared some statistics about the emergence of Boas in the territory. According to Ms. Angeli, no Boas were reported in 2011, two Boas were reported in both 2012 and 2013 and one in 2014. The Boas surged in the territory between 2015 and 2016, with 27 and 15 being reported in those years respectively.

The bill also defines the eligibility requirements for participants. Interested persons must be at least 18 years of age, have a VI driver license, consent to a criminal background check, must not be convicted of a felony or wildlife-related offense within the last 5 years, sign a waiver, have an email account, access to a device that has access to a data collection app, and must successfully complete a certification process administered by D.P.N.R.'s Division of Fish and Wildlife.

There is an education and training program required to be eligible to receive bounties through the program.

Senators voiced their concern regarding the absence of William Cole, chief of education for the Division of Fish and Wildlife. Mr. Cole failed to file a correspondence with the Legislature and did not inform his employers that he would not be present at the hearing.

Mr. Gittens initially threatened to motion for a subpoena but the motion was not made during the day.

D.P.N.R. Commissioner Jean Piere-Oriol said disciplinary action would be dealt with internally and that Mr. Cole's actions would not be tolerated.

Senator Javan James was looking forward to Mr. Cole's thoughts on the matter at hand. He referenced a Facebook post from Government House that stated Mr. Cole and Governor Bryan met regarding the infestation of Red Tail Boas on St. Croix, and he wanted "to drill down and ask him what those discussions were like and "what the governor has in mind when it comes to getting rid of snakes."

Mr. James added, "There's really not much to ask because the main person that deals with snakes in the territory is not here."

Senator Franklin Johnson was extremely concerned with Mr. Cole's absence as it was revealed that Mr. Cole punched in to work but did not attend the hearing that his superiors told him to attend. Neither the director of Fish and Wildlife nor the commissioner answered questions about Mr. Cole's whereabouts during the hearing.

It was revealed that if Mr. Cole receives a call about a Boa, he is allowed to clock out of work and deal with it for "VI Snakes", a nonprofit organization.

Said Mr. Gittens, "I believe that what is taking place is while he has this nonprofit entity that he is in possession of a grant from... it will be illegal for him to collect on that grant and collect from the same time from the government of the Virgin Islands. I do strongly believe that is why he chooses to sign out, which is a smart thing to do, but at the same time this is where we need the

leadership of the agency. People can't walk on and off the job as they see fit.”

The full bill can be read [here](#).

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