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USVI Tourism Sector Could Roar Back to Life Soon Following CDC Letter to Cruise Industry Allowing Mid-July Resumption of Cruise Travel From U.S. Ports if Certain Criteria Are Met

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Leisure tourism in the U.S. Virgin Islands, which before March 2020 saw thousands of almost daily cruise travel visitors on the streets of Charlotte Amalie supporting a chain of sectors and daily commerce, could roar back to life in mid-July, a major development after the territory's largest contributor to gross domestic product was all but shutdown as a result of the coronavirus pandemic.

Late Wednesday, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention wrote a letter to the cruise industry that said cruise travel could restart mid-July if certain criteria are met. The letter, obtained

by [USA Today](#), calls for 95 percent of passengers to be fully vaccinated along with 98 percent of a vessel's crew.

"We acknowledge that cruising will never be a zero-risk activity and that the goal of the CSO's [Conditional Sail Order's] phased approach is to resume passenger operations in a way that mitigates the risk of COVID-19 transmission onboard cruise ships and across port communities," Aimee Treffiletti, head of the Maritime Unit for CDC's COVID-19 response within its Global Mitigation Task Force for COVID-19, said in the letter.

CDC spokesperson Caitlin Shockey gave USA Today a more specific timeline, telling the publication that cruise lines could begin passenger voyages from the United States in mid-July, depending on cruise lines' pace and compliance with the CDC's Framework for Conditional Sailing Order.

The difference this time is that the latest letter and outline presented by the CDC is achievable, and cruise industry executives have expressed optimism about finally being able to set sail, said a person close to the matter who spoke to USA Today on the condition of anonymity.

"CDC looks forward to continued engagement with the industry and urges cruise lines to submit Phase 2A port agreements as soon as possible to maintain the timeline of passenger voyages by mid-July," Ms. Shockey said.

If cruise travel resumes in July, the tourism market in the USVI — and by extension the coffers of the local government — would potentially see a surge in traffic and revenue, helping lift the local economy as it would lead to more employment and serve as a catalyst to heightened commerce. According to Dept. of Tourism Commissioner Joseph Boschulte, tourism represents 60 percent of the territory's gross domestic product, a staggering slice of the GDP whose size brings into focus the displacement the industry's Covid-19-induced closures encouraged.

[In October](#), V.I. Port Authority Executive Director Carlton Dowe said V.I.P.A. had lost \$12 million as a result of the halt of cruise travel since March.

"It has been a struggle," Mr. Dowe told the Consortium during an interview that followed the October hearing. "We've had to really streamline what we have been doing unless it was essential, like police and fire, and we really tried to eliminate hiring unless it will be paid by federal grants."

Mr. Dowe further stated that the Port Authority was projected to lose roughly \$17 million by the end of 2020 as a result of the diminished traffic, both from cruise ships and ferry travel from the British Virgin Islands.

Along with V.I.P.A., the West Indian Company's maritime revenues performed below earnings projection by 37 percent, Anthony Ottley, WICO interim CEO and director of property management said in October. He further stated that WICO saw a net loss of \$7.8 million for the period ending August 31, 2020, which was \$5.3 million more than forecasted, according to data provided by the company.

Last Month, WICO — struggling to stay afloat as cruise travel continues to be delayed and its dock remains empty — reverted to a three-day workweek [first initiated on November 2, 2020](#) but lifted on February 1st, 2021.

The CDC's latest letter to cruise industry officials includes updates to its guidance to allow for a mid-July cruise travel resumption. According to USA Today, they include the following:

- Ships can bypass the required simulated test voyages carrying volunteers and jump to sailings with paying passengers if 98% of crew and 95% of passengers are fully vaccinated.
- CDC will review and respond to applications from cruise lines for simulated voyages within 5 days, a review previously expected to take 60 days.
- CDC will update its testing and quarantine requirements for passengers and crew on sailings with paying passengers to align with the CDC's guidance for fully vaccinated people. So, for example, instead of taking a PCR lab test ahead of boarding vaccinated passengers can take a rapid antigen test upon embarkation.
- CDC has clarified that cruise ship operators may enter into a "multi-port agreement" rather than a single port agreement as long as all port and local authorities sign the agreement.
- The CDC has clarified guidance on quarantine guidelines for passengers who may be exposed to or contract COVID-19. For example, local passengers may be able to drive home and passengers who have traveled by air to cruise may quarantine in a hotel.

The updates come on the heels of all-ends pressure on the CDC to allow cruise travel to resume. From state and local governments to industry officials, many pointing to the seemingly unfair status given to the cruise travel sector when other parts of the leisure travel industry have been allowed to operate.

Other countries such as the U.K., Singapore and Italy have authorized cruises or set a clear target date for them to set sail. According to the Cruise Lines International Association, almost 400,000 passengers have sailed since some countries began to allow cruises again in July.