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Limetree Bay Laser-Focused on Coker Unit Investigation as it Invites Independent Experts to Refinery; Senators Encourage Firm to Better Communicate With Public

Business / **Published On May 19, 2021 05:58 AM /**

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Legislature vehicle parked at Limetree Bay on Tues. May 18, 2021. Senators gathered at the facility for a meeting with company executives to discuss recent incidents at the refinery portion of the plant. The meeting was open to the media. By. ERNICE GILBERT FOR VI CONSORTIUM

ST. CROIX — Senators on Tuesday pressed Limetree Bay executives to better communicate with the Virgin Islands public, a move lawmakers said would help build residents' confidence in the company's good corporate citizenship as questions about health and safety remain high following

the restart of refining at the south shore plant.

The pressure to be more forthcoming through press conferences whose aim would be to keep the community abreast of health and safety protocols came during a meeting at Limetree Bay Tuesday afternoon that was open to the media. Twelve senators attended the important gathering, with the only absent lawmakers being Senators Javan James, Alma Francis Heyliger and Carla Joseph.

Among other officials, Limetree CEO Jeffrey Rinker and General Manager Neil Morgan were in attendance. There, they expressed to lawmakers their commitment to a safe eventual restart following the 60-day shutdown. Limetree Bay had [voluntarily shutdown](#) the refinery portion of the plant following the massive flare incident on May 12, but the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency two days later [ordered](#) that refining be halted for 60 days.

Mr. Rinker said independent investigators will be performing a complete audit of refining units to determine what exactly occurred, though the refinery's own preliminary findings point to an issue at the Coker unit where a bypass valve that was supposed to be locked during the phase when the Coker unit was being quenched, was not — a finding that Mr. Rinker said confounded investigators. He said it had yet to be determined why the valve was not locked or who removed the lock. Mr. Rinker said there's a highly controlled procedure that includes documentation review before the bypass valve can be unlocked, and that during a March review of the Coker unit, documentation shows that the valve was locked, which was also verified in the field. However, on May 12 when the [unusually large flare incident](#) occurred, the bypass valve was unlocked.

"We're going to be shutdown until some independent experts tell us that we've fixed the problem and the refinery is safe to start and to operate compliantly and to operate without incidents," Mr. Rinker said. He said the company's primary goal was to get the refinery in a safe condition for an extended shutdown and to continue performing cleanup. Contractors have already started laying off employees as refinery operations wind down, which will impact the local economy.

Lawmakers throughout the meeting urged the company to start holding press events aimed at keeping the public informed, and Senate President Donna Frett-Gregory said that once an investigation has occurred, corrective action taken and oil refining eventually restarts, company officials will be summoned to the Legislature to provide a complete update to the community.

"We are very concerned about this situation, we know of the economic impact of Limetree to the territory, not only to St. Croix but to the U.S. Virgin Islands. We know the concerns around all that has occurred and we really should be calling a Committee of the Whole hearing," Ms. Frett-Gregory said as she urged the company to be more forthcoming with the public.

Senator Kenneth Gittens said having the press events "was the right thing to do," though he understood the company's caution "from a business standpoint." However, "at some point I think you all really need to huddle together" to come up with a plan to address the public. "I think if you explain that to the community, they will realize that you are a good corporate citizen," Mr. Gittens said.

The same point was stressed by Senator Janelle Sarauw at the event. "Lack of communication breeds chaos," she said. "I'm being very stern right now that within 24 hours, Limetree Bay must have, not may, shall have a press conference. You have to talk to the people of St. Croix and that's all part of being good corporate citizens."

Another discussion at the meeting was determining the actual source of the odors, which residents have continued to complain about even after the refinery was shutdown last Wednesday. While

the company had [taken responsibility](#) for two incidents — April 22 and May 6, — with refining halted and units shutdown, the investigation into the source of the smell has broadened since there's now the possibility that the origin could be elsewhere.

Relative to monitoring capabilities of the government, Senator Kurt Vialet said that since 2019, the Senate appropriated a total of roughly \$2.1 million to the Dept. of Planning and Natural Resources to procure the requisite resources needed to adequately regulate the refinery, primarily air quality monitoring. But the department, he said, had not utilized those funds. The lack of enforcement capabilities has played out embarrassingly for the local government, as the EPA had to travel to the territory to perform its own testing. The V.I. National Guard also provided its expertise and equipment in the government's effort to find the source of the odor.

In a press release issued late Tuesday, Ms. Frett-Gregory said lawmakers on Friday met with the commissioners of D.P.N.R. and the Dept. of Health, Jean-Pierre Oriol and Justa Encarnacion respectively, to discuss the incidents at Limetree Bay. Also at the meeting was VITEMA Director Daryl Jaschen.

"The purpose of the meeting was to discuss the protocols for timely notification, challenges the government entities were experiencing with working with Limetree and providing timely information to the community. The Government's team acknowledged that there were communication challenges, and they are working towards ensuring that communication flows better so that those impacted are notified immediately," stated the release.

It continued, "Commissioner Oriol of the Department of Planning and Natural Resources indicated that the government is working with a vendor to get air monitors and had not yet used the funding appropriated to the agency to purchase the equipment to monitor the air quality.

"Commissioner Oriol advised the Senators that the federal EPA had placed temporary monitors to check the air quality at strategic locations on St. Croix. Senators urged the government's team to ensure that a protocol is properly established and communicated to the public.

"Senators stated that it is important that the Government of the Virgin Islands ensure that Limetree complies with all environmental regulations and that the only way to do so is to make sure the government is also monitoring the activities."