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The EPA Has Found Source of Odor On St. Croix: Uncovered Sewer Manhole Near Airport on Government Property

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EPA's Monitoring Station 1 is located on this hill in Estate Anguilla (gov't property), which is situated across the road from the Henry E. Rohlsen Airport's runway on the east side. By. ERNICE GILBERT FOR THE VI CONSORTIUM

The Environmental Protection Agency on Thursday afternoon notified the local government that it had found at least one source of the gaseous odor that has been affecting St. Croix. According to the EPA, the smell — strong hydrogen sulfide-like odors — was emanating from an uncovered sewer manhole located atop a hill across the road from the Henry E. Rohlsen Airport runway, facing east.

The EPA has installed five monitoring stations around the Limetree Bay facility in an effort to monitor the strong odors affecting the island, and to determine a source. Monitor Station 1 is located at Estate Anguilla near the [drag racing facility](#), which is across the airport's runway facing east. See a map showing the monitoring stations [here](#).

The EPA said it used a Jerome Model J605 monitor and detected hydrogen sulfide at 3.75 ppm, and further confirmed the detection using a MultiRae monitor at the top of the manhole, measuring hydrogen sulfide at 1.1 ppm. "Readings on these instruments at or above 1.0 ppm are considered elevated and merit further investigation," the EPA said.

The agency said a sampling tube for a Single Point Monitor was lowered into the manhole and detected a reading of greater than 10 ppm, the upper detection limit for the device. The EPA [said](#) it "immediately notified the Virgin Islands government and will assist the local authorities as they determine how to address this matter."

Later on Thursday, the EPA detected another ten-minute average reading again on Monitor 1 located west of the Limetree Bay refinery on the Anguilla Estate. The reading "showed a level that exceeded a threshold value set for hydrogen sulfide, which EPA refers to as a Tier 1 Action Level," according to the notification from the agency. "All of the action levels established are based on ten-minute average concentrations. The Tier 1 Action Level for hydrogen sulfide is 0.01 ppm, and the highest level monitored by EPA was approximately 0.02 ppm measured at approximately 8:45 p.m. Thursday.

"This approximately 0.02ppm level was measured at Monitor Station 1, west of the facility. The elevated levels monitored by EPA started on May 20 a little after 8:30pm. EPA immediately notified the Virgin Islands government and ATSDR," the EPA continued.

Governor Albert Bryan told the Consortium the administration would be cautious in issuing a response to the EPA's latest findings, adding that the government's original statement on the matter would stand. "At this point, we are maintaining our original statement until we have definitive proof. The matter is under investigation and we hope to have something solid soon. We won't jump to conclusions and make aspersions until we verify," the governor said.

This latest development will come as a relief to Limetree Bay, which this week is facing a surfeit of complaints from St. Croix residents in the form of at least three class action lawsuits — [including over 200 residents](#) in a suit from the Office of Lee Rohn and Associates.

Attorney Yohanna Manning, a longtime Virgin Islands lawyer who represents several refinery contractors, said he was shocked by the EPA's findings. "They asked Willie Sutton why he robs banks, and he said because that's where the money is. This case is no different," Mr. Manning said. "They are jumping on the refinery because, again that's where the money is. The gospel tells us that one of the oldest sins known to man, is greed. These lawyers are greedy. They are greedy."

He added, "As lawyers we take an oath to investigate before we accuse. There is no evidence whatsoever that the H₂S odors came from the refinery, but there is now ample proof that a manhole operated by the Virgin Islands government is emitting strong odors and illegal quantities of H₂S."

On the recent lawsuits filed against the refinery, Mr. Manning said they should be withdrawn. "Hundreds of my clients' workers are at home, not generating income like they should because of these claims. We have been bombarded by accusation after accusation and none of these accusations proved that the true source was the refinery. Workers have been laid off because of

this. I consider this a civil rights issue, Black and brown men and women have been sidelined for absolutely no reason whatsoever. They were told not to come back to work until further notice. It's time to reopen the doors to the refinery so they can work."

Limetree [shut down refining following the incident](#) and the Environmental Protection Agency on May 14 [ordered a 60-day halt](#). Since then, Limetree said it has been performing cleanup on properties on the west side of St. Croix, investigating the cause of the incident, and taking several other steps — including hiring an independent firm to audit the refinery and determine what caused the latest occurrence.

Limetree CEO Jeffery Rinker during a Tuesday meeting with senators at the plant, said while the firm had yet to determine the cause of the flare, preliminary findings pointed 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. Mr. Rinker said it had yet to be determined why the valve was not locked or who removed the lock. He 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," said Senate President Donna Frett-Gregory 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.