

The Virgin Islands Consortium

DPNR Says There Has Been a Monopoly on the USVI Fishing Industry for 20 Years as it Defends Decision to Lift Moratorium

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Department of Planning and Natural Resources Commissioner Jean-Pierre Oriol on Friday responded following comments from Senator Janelle Sarauw that a blanket lift on the fishing moratorium [would be harmful to local fishermen](#). “It is saddening to hear inaccurate statements insinuating that the ending of the moratorium on fishing licenses would be a threat to our local fishing community,” said the commissioner.

He said as the agency charged with enforcing catch limits and seasonal closures, performing port sampling, and collecting fisheries independent data that ensures the

sustainability of the fishery, D.P.N.R. has considered the impacts and intends a gradual opening of the fishery.

According to the release, the Fishery Advisory Committees comments both for and against lifting the moratorium were taken into consideration; discussion on a selective opening to include suggestions such as first preference to fisher helpers, or limiting fishers by gear type, have been before the committees for the last several months. The decision to lift the moratorium was also made after looking at the 40% decrease in participation in the fishery since 2001, said D.P.N.R.

In 2021, 214 commercial fishers were registered out of 833 eligible to hold licenses throughout the territory. The department sent 619 letters to those not registered asking individuals to renew in the 2021 registration period or forfeit their license. Only 14 responses to hold the license were received. Of the over 200 commercial fishers registered, more than half indicated that they do not fish, D.P.N.R. said.

According to the release, the department also considered catch report data and effects on fishing limits, the economic effect of creating new jobs, food security in the islands, as well as listening to young Virgin Islanders coming to the Department requesting licenses as part of the decision-making process.

The department said it acknowledged that there are those who would be resistant to this change. It added that there has been a monopoly on the fishing industry for 20 years. Pursuant to Virgin Islands Code Title 11 Section 1402, "The Department of Planning and Natural Resources, through its Commissioner, shall be responsible for the active and vigorous promotion of the commercial fishing industry, in all of its aspects, in the U.S. Virgin Islands." One of the ways must be to promote the infusion of new persons into the industry, D.P.N.R. said.

The department said its intent is to review each application received over the next nine months - until the 2022-2023 fishing registration in July 2022 –and issue approval to a limited number of individuals territory-wide to register for the commercial fishery. As described in the materials provided online, the opportunities in each district will allow eager fishers, including people who have held commercial helper licenses for decades, to become small business owners for the first time.

D.P.N.R. said it received a fair amount of interest Friday, with one person remarking, "I've been fishing for over 15 years as a helper, it's always been a dream, and now it's coming true, by doing what I like as a young boy. Fishing is important to me because I get to feed my family, it's my daily bread."

The associated documents are available at the Division of Fish and Wildlife offices on Thursdays or Fridays at 45 Mars Hill, St. Croix or 6972 Estate Nazareth, and St. Thomas between the hours of 9:00 a.m. and 4:00 p.m., except holidays, or on the DPNR-DFW website [here](#).

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