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Congresswoman Plaskett Again Calls for WAPA State of Emergency; Bryan Continues to Resist

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Delegate to Congress Stacey Plaskett By. Ernice Gilbert for the Virgin Islands Consortium

Congresswoman Stacey Plaskett repeated her call for Gov. Albert Bryan to declare a State of Emergency as the Water and Power Authority's financial blunders have plunged the territory into another crisis situation.

"I reiterate that I believe declaring WAPA in a state of emergency would be important," Ms. Plaskett said in press release on Sunday, one day after WAPA's liquid propane supplier [suspended delivery of the crucial fuel source](#) to the territory.

Around noon Saturday, the Authority was forced to revert to full use of the more expensive No. 2 diesel oil to fuel generators at the Estate Richmond Power Plant on St. Croix and the Randolph Harley Power Plant on St. Thomas, according to WAPA and government officials. With the limited back-up capabilities of the diesel generators at both plants, more frequent power outages throughout the territory are likely during the holiday season, officials said.

WAPA failed to make a scheduled December payment to Vitol, the liquid propane supplier, resulting in the loss of propane fuel and related terminal operations. Gov. Bryan called the loss of propane as a fuel supply "another step in destabilizing" WAPA.

Meanwhile, the Public Services Commission earlier this month voted to reduce the highly unpopular fuel charge billed to WAPA customers, and to allow another surcharge to expire.

The rate cuts — welcomed WAPA residential and business customers -- leave the historically mismanaged power Authority unable to pay its bills, including the staggering debt owed to Vitol, WAPA has complained.

Mr. Bryan and all 15 members of the Legislature met in an emergency session on Saturday to begin to plan to bail WAPA out of its fiscal mess. One possible plan calls for the central government to subsidize WAPA to the tune of \$3 million-per-month or more to deal with its delinquent Vitol debt.

Officials will meet again this week to consider longer term solutions to the ongoing financial and operational mismanagement of the Authority.

In September, Ms. Plaskett made an initial call for a State of Emergency that, she said, would bring federal and other outside resources to the territory's aid.

"Now," she said, "we will need to use all the resources in our toolbox and work creatively to solve problems that have been decades in the making."

The governor has resisted the call to declare an energy State of Emergency. The latest chain of events have not changed his position.

"There is no consideration of declaring a State of Emergency. It would not give us any tools, or have any impact on the situation," he said when the subject was brought up in a Saturday press conference.

"It is a crisis, but a declaration of a State of Emergency would have zero effect," Mr. Bryan said.

Ms. Plaskett said the territory is best served by using every tool at its disposal. "I appreciate that the Governor has stated that WAPA's position at this time is indeed a crisis. Now, we will need to use all the resources in our toolbox and work creatively to solve problems that have been decades in the making.

Trump administration officials have told Ms. Plaskett that an emergency declaration would be a positive signal that the territory "has faced the sober reality that the Water and Power Authority is, indeed, broken," she said.

"WAPA has a massive debt load, untenable contracts and severe operational inefficiencies that cannot be easily solved, and even with rate increases, financial markets remain skeptical of refinancing.

"We are at a critical stage where the VI government's next steps may determine the utility's direction for not only the next months and years, but potentially for several generations," Ms. Plaskett said in her written statement on Sunday.

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