

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Work Was Supposed to Begin in June 2019 on USVI Tsunami Warning System Repairs, 7 Months Later, Horns Still Don't Work

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Tsunami Warning Siren in Sion Farm St. Croix in March, 2016 By. ERNICE GILBERT/VI CONSORTIUM

Every day for the past week, the Virgin Islands Territorial Emergency Management Agency's phone and email alert system has been advising residents of destructive earthquakes occurring in neighboring Puerto Rico, along with notifications that, at least as of Sunday, there was no threat of tsunami. But the phone and email alerts are currently the only way VITEMA has to notify residents, as the 44 tsunami warning horns

spread about the Virgin Islands to jolt residents in case of an imminent tsunami threat, have been inoperable since Hurricanes Irma and Maria ravaged the territory in 2017.

So, say for example a tsunami struck at midnight, when most people are asleep, the Government of the Virgin Islands would have no audible way aside from the email and phone notifications to alert residents. The result could be devastating.

For its part, VITEMA said in a release that the warning system was currently being repaired, but the agency did not say when the system would be operable.

In March 2019, the Federal Emergency Management Agency [obligated \\$1.6 million to the U.S. Virgin Islands for the tsunami early warning system](#). FEMA said then that work would start on the system in June of the same year. "Beginning June 2019, the system will undergo a full refurbishment to replace and harden many of the key components damaged by the storms. To protect against future severe weather events, wooden support poles will be replaced with steel poles rated two classes higher in strength, heavy-duty solar panels and brackets will be mounted, and robust tensioned cables will add structural stability," FEMA said.

FEMA said the system was being modernized for compatibility with the Integrated Public Alert and Warning System (IPAWS), the U.S.'s alert and warning infrastructure, an integration FEMA said will boost the systems capabilities to notify and alert the public of many other potential catastrophic events, including hurricanes, earthquakes and other weather-related traumas.

Seven months later, however, the Government of the Virgin Islands have not provided a public update on when the sirens would be in operation again. VITEMA did provide some tsunami preparatory tips.

Residents are strongly encouraged to sign up to Alert VI on VITEMA's website which will provide real-time emergency notifications via cell phone calls, text messages, landlines, emails and TTY devices.

Immediate recommended actions include:

- Signing up to Alert VI today at www.vitema.vi.gov
- Prepare an emergency "go-bag" for your home and vehicle today
- Practice "Drop, Cover, and Hold On" earthquake techniques with the elderly, disabled, and children
- Designate meeting points and reuniting plans should family members be in different areas at the time of an event
- Be sure that you have a battery-operated radio available if communication systems become impaired. Follow instructions provided by VITEMA and other official sources
- Find the best route to get to higher ground in all the areas that you work and spend leisure time