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Waste Haulers Block Path to Anguilla Landfill, Halt Garbage Collection Throughout St. Croix Until Payment of Millions Owed is Fulfilled

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A crane that belongs to Marco St. Croix blocks the entry to the Anguilla Landfill as the four major waste haulers on St. Croix on Wed. July 6, 2022 took their most aggressive action to receive millions owed to them by the V.I. government. By. ERNICE GILBERT/ V.I. CONSORTIUM

The four major waste haulers on St. Croix on Wednesday staged a massive protest action, blocking entry to the Anguilla Landfill and deciding as a group to stop collecting waste throughout St. Croix until payments owed to them by the V.I. government are made in full.

While a total sum of what is owed to the four haulers was not divulged, Marco St. Croix alone is owed \$23 million dating back to 2017, according to company owner Shawn Baptiste. Bates Trucking, Just Right Trucking and Goldmine Trash Removal are owed large sums as well, according to the owners, who spoke to the Consortium Wednesday morning at the protest site.

The men said they've exhausted meetings with local officials, including the Waste Management Authority's executive director Roger Merritt, and Governor Albert Bryan. Mr. Bates said Mr. Bryan had promised to pay the waste haulers three months ago, but not a single payment had been made to date.

"We sat down with the governor three months ago and he promised he was going to take care of us. Up to now we haven't gotten nothing," Mr. Bates said.

Mr. Baptiste said they've gotten a lot of promises for payment but those promises have not been kept. "I understand a lot of things is a work in process, but at the end I have nearly 100 employees. That means that's 100 families I have to deal with," remarked Mr. Baptiste, adding that at the end of each week he can't say to his employees that he does not have money to pay them.

"I have to make sure [my employees are covered], so [the government] has to realize that we're running a business just like the government is a business and we need to be treated like a business. We have bills, we have necessities — everybody got their families, everybody wants to live good in the Virgin Islands," Mr. Baptiste stated. He said truckers sometimes feel like they're begging for monies owed to them. "They need to give us some respect. We feel disrespected," he said.

All four company owners said inflation has added to costs across the board — from fuel to parts and equipment, which adds to financial pressure even as the government's debt to the haulers continues to swell. Further exacerbating the problem, Mr. Baptiste said, is an expired contract whose terms haulers continue to operate under, though the contract expired over a decade ago. "They're paying us the same money from then until now," he said, adding that "cost of living has gone up, tires have gone up — many things have gone up."

The haulers have agreed to stop collecting waste across St. Croix and they intend to keep the entrance of the landfill blocked until they are paid, in what amounts to the most aggressive action by haulers to force the government's hand in an effort to bring relief to their companies.

As this story was being written, the Waste Management Authority, the government arm tasked with paying haulers through appropriations from the V.I. government, issued a release advising that effectively immediately it would not be accepting waste at the Anguilla Landfill on St. Croix.

The excavator used to block entry to the Anguilla Landfill as of Wednesday morning did not have diesel in its tank, and the men said it would not move until the government pays in full, at which point fuel would be purchased for the heavy equipment.

"This is not our intent but they've brought us to a point whereas we've sat down with [the Waste Management executive director], the governor — we've sat down with everybody that we could and at the end of the day we haven't gotten not 1 cent drop in the bucket," Mr. Baptiste said.

Attempts to reach Governor Bryan for comment were unsuccessful.

Senator Novelle Francis was in the area speaking to haulers and making phone calls in search of a solution. Mr. Francis appeared frustrated by the situation, and said the Senate has consistently allocated funds to the Waste Management Authority to fund services provided by the waste

haulers. He deemed the matter unacceptable, and said the Bryan administration should make immediate moves to fulfill the government's covenants with the haulers.

Also on the scene was Senator Kenneth Gittens. He too stood with the haulers and said he had been making calls to find a swift solution. "I'm sorry that it came to this for us to give the attention to this situation," he said.

Sammuel Sanes, a former senator and current St. Croix administrator with the Bryan administration, said the government was working to bring a solution to the matter today. "The executive branch is trying to get funding at this time as we speak," he said. "I know that there are contracts that have not been fulfilled, I understand that, and hopefully by the end of today we will be able to come to some type of agreement. That's what we're working on right now."

Mr. Baptiste, the owner of Marco St. Croix, said his company had won the contract to pave the Melvin Evan's Highway. However, the bonding company he has worked with on other projects refused to provide funding, citing the large sum owed to Marco St. Croix by the V.I. government. "Do you know what happened to the job?" Mr. Baptiste asked rhetorically. "They took it from me and gave it to V.I. Paving.

"Now here it is I am a young businessman within my community trying to build it. These are the things that are knocking me back down where I can't afford to put my business to the next level, and it's a shameful thing."