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Sargassum Blooms Cost \$25,000 a Day to Remove From Territory's Shorelines, DPNR Says as Problem Grows in USVI

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Sargassum at the Divi Carina Bay Resort on St. Croix in July 2022. By. V.I. CONSORTIUM

The government of the Virgin Islands will have to make a decision between the health implications of its residents inhaling rotting sargassum seaweed and the financial cost to remove it from the territory's shorelines.

Dept. of Planning and Natural Resources Commissioner, Jean-Pierre Oriol, estimates that it will cost the government \$25,000 a day to mitigate dense sargassum blooms — the same price he says it is costing hoteliers.

“Particularly over here on St Thomas, we don’t have large areas where we can separate it, or bury some of it but the removal process is about \$25,000 a day,” he noted, explaining that removing it means having to truck small volumes at a time to the landfill.

“You cannot bring large volumes because when it’s in that decaying stage it’s flammable,” he said.

Decaying sargassum seaweed produces a gaseous fume known as hydrogen sulfide — a poisonous, corrosive, and flammable chemical compound that smells like rotten eggs.

Mr. Oriol, who was responding to questions from Senator Kurt Vialet, chair on the Committee on Finance and Vice Chair Sen. Donna Frett-Gregory, says it is almost hopeless to remove the seaweed after it reaches shore.

In the Red Hook area, where residents are currently plagued by blankets of foul-smelling seaweed, the commissioner said special equipment would be required and even then, it would be difficult to cut through the mangroves.

He explained that the best thing that the department can do is keep the seaweed from landing on the shores but even then, there are challenges. “We attempted to do that in Red Hook, [to prevent it from] from landing in front of our office area, we put out a boom, the volume of seaweed that came in actually collapsed the boom itself,” Mr. Oriol said.

“We’re talking about now having to cut ourselves, go through mangroves to get inside of Red Hook because the entire Red Hook Bay is a system of mangroves and seaside mahoe which are difficult trees, dense roots that are into that system.”

The sargassum is also affecting government workers particularly in Red Hook, St. Thomas who are exposed to the gases while stationed in their offices.

According to the Mr. Oriol, the fish and wildlife team will be moving into temporary spaces since the sargassum has created significant problems for those officers.

Sargassum is often seen at the beginning of the summer months in April as a result of rise in sea temperature which accelerates the reproduction of the seaweed. For the past 10 years, Caribbean countries have witnessed a significant increase in the volume of sargassum reaching its shores and bringing with it dead sea creatures and waste.