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Bryan Declares State of Emergency on Sargassum as Problem Becomes Acute on St. Croix; FEMA Teams Expected in USVI to Assist With Local Response

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Sargassum on a beach in St. Lucia. The Sargassum blooms are not only impacting the U.S. Virgin Islands, but islands across the Caribbean as well. By. GETTY IMAGES

Government House announced Sunday that Governor Albert Bryan has issued an executive order declaring a state of emergency in the territory to mitigate the impact from the unusually high amounts of sargassum seaweed piling up on USVI shores and having a negative impact on water-production capabilities on St. Croix.

Mr. Bryan also has sent a request to the Biden Administration to declare a federal emergency on St. Croix regarding the sargassum inundation, Government House said, and teams from the

Federal Emergency Management Agency are expected to be on the ground in the territory today to assist the government of the Virgin Islands in coordinating a response.

According to the administration, because of the sargassum build-up, maintenance efforts have increased to keep the water intake for the desalinization plant on St. Croix clear from seaweed and biological debris resulting from the ecosystems associated with large sargassum blooms. In addition, reduced water production could also create a negative effect on the V.I. Water and Power Authority's power-generating capacity.

Government House said that while there currently are no negative impacts regarding public health resulting from the sargassum build-up, Mr. Bryan is advising residents of St. Croix to conserve water as the GVI takes steps to resolve the issues caused by the seaweed.

"I want to assure St. Croix that we don't anticipate any impact on public health from this annual invasion of sargassum in our waters, including the stench that we all, unfortunately, have learned to live with every summer," the governor said. "However, the seaweed overrunning our beaches also brings the potential for disruption to businesses and other negative financial impacts to our economy. I have assembled a team that includes primary public agencies, including Health, DPNR and VITEMA, and the semiautonomous agencies that have been meeting to coordinate efforts with FEMA and other federal partners."

Gov't House said the executive order that Governor Bryan issued designates Department of Planning and Natural Resources Commissioner Jean-Pierre Oriol as the incident commander and directs VITEMA to activate the Emergency Operation Centers; directs the Department of Licensing and Consumer Affairs to institute relevant price freezes on certain goods and services; directs all agencies under the direction of the governor to fully cooperate with DPNR's efforts; and suspends certain procurement requirements relevant to mitigating the issue.

While the immediate threat from the sargassum is specific to St. Croix, preemptive efforts also are underway on St. Thomas to prevent adverse impacts to water-production capabilities in that district, the administration said.

DPNR is monitoring the National Oceanography and Atmospheric Administration's Caribbean Coastal Ocean Observing System to track and forecast Sargassum blooms and potential impacts, and the seaweed is forecast to affect Caribbean waters into mid-October.