

The Virgin Islands Consortium

VITEMA Says Water Production Problems on St. Croix Still 'Very Real' as a Result of Sargassum Influx Affecting WAPA's Richmond Plant; Bryan Seeks to Repay Entirety of Retroactive Wages During Potential Second Term

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WAPA blocks off area as it attempts to clear intake lines of Sargassum. By. V.I. CONSORTIUM

Monday's press briefing from Government House began with a thank you from Governor Albert Bryan Jr. to Virgin Islanders who participated in and supported the burial services

of Governor Charles S. Turnbull over the weekend, before officials moved on to providing updates on the matters of the day.

VITEMA Director Daryl Jaschen was first, and he disclosed that while the sargassum threat had abated somewhat from the critical point reached last week, the challenge to water production on St. Croix was still “very real”. The island's desalination plants are struggling to maintain maximum output, and at some points that output has declined by as much as 30 percent.

The good news is that there are now between 3.5 and 4 days of water storage, with Mr. Jaschen indicating that there is a contingency plan in place by WAPA to bring in potable water from off island should storage levels drop below a critical threshold.

The bad news is that even though the Water and Power Authority has, along with another desalination plant operator, been eliminating sargassum from their systems daily since July 18th, intakes still have to be stopped regularly to clear sargassum clogs from pipes and filters. Jaschen indicated that particles of decomposing sargassum can pass through several layers of filters, complicating matters.

The VITEMA director said that a multi-sectoral effort was ongoing, with several agencies including the Department of Planning and Natural Resources, coordinating to clear the pernicious seaweed from coastlines in an environmentally responsible way.

To ensure there is enough water to meet demands on St. Croix, Jaschen said that a private operator and longtime WAPA partner — Seven Seas — has had to increase its operation to now run 24/hrs a day and bring in additional staff on to St. Croix to cope with water production demands.

Meanwhile, scientists and researchers from several agencies including the Army Corps of Engineers and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, are working on developing predictive models in the hopes of eventually being able to develop a long-term management plan for dealing with future years of sargassum influx, which are only expected to worsen in the advent of climate change.

Territorial Epidemiologist Dr. Esther Ellis also appeared at Monday's briefing, with an update on the USVI's Covid-19 status. There were 189 active cases territory-wide as of Monday: 116 on St. Croix, 68 on St. Thomas and 5 on St. John. The seven-day positivity rate for testing across the USVI was 6.5%, trending lower than in previous updates. Dr. Ellis noted the presence of the BA.4 and BA.5 subvariants of Covid-19, and stressed that the best protection against these and other strains of sars-cov-2 is to be up to date on vaccinations, including boosters.

For his part, Governor Bryan made several announcements, including of a \$25 million grant that is meant to go towards [performing roadworks on Veterans Drive](#), in downtown Charlotte Amalie. He also called on USVI residents to continue participating in the last weeks of “Walk out Wednesday”, a territorial initiative to spur healthy lifestyle choices among residents.

The governor also announced a new health initiative targeted towards seniors. At three locations across the territory — Altona Lagoon on St. Croix, Emancipation Garden on St. Thomas, and the Dept. of Sports, Parks and Recreation Fitness Center on St. John —

there will be free fitness sessions from 9-10 a.m. on Tuesdays and Thursdays. The program starts on August 23 and will run until the end of September. A visit to ourbestlifeusvi.com can provide more information.

Towards the end of Monday's briefing, Governor Bryan confirmed what the Consortium reported earlier in the day, that the money allocated for retroactive payments for government employees has been increased, [from the original \\$25 million announced to \\$40 million](#). Governor Bryan said this has been accomplished due to prudent fiscal management and the government deciding to adjust its priorities in order to pay down the approximately \$135 million outstanding. "We can forgo some of the things we want," the governor said.

With Earned Income Tax Credit payments now being reimbursed by the federal government, Bryan says the accelerated payment schedule would likely continue, with a view towards retiring the debt that has been outstanding for over 30 years, before the end of a potential second term for the Bryan/Roach administration.