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Senators Scrutinize USVI's Hurricane Readiness as Potent Season Looms

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Damage in St. Thomas caused by Hurricane Irma in 2017. By. V.I. CONSORTIUM

The Senate Committee on Homeland Security, Justice, and Public Safety met on Monday to hear testimony about the territory's readiness for the upcoming hurricane season. V.I. Territorial Emergency Management Agency Executive Director Daryl Jaschen, joined by key agency representatives, outlined the territory's preparations and highlighted the collaborative efforts of various departments and organizations.

Predictions from Colorado State University anticipate a formidable season with 13 named storms, six likely to become hurricanes, and two escalating into major hurricanes. Further insights into the forecast will be unveiled by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration on May 25.

According to Jaschen, during National Hurricane Preparedness Week, VITEMA conducted outreach and messaging campaigns to raise awareness among individuals, families, and businesses. Emphasizing self-sufficiency for up to five days following a hurricane impact, the agency distributed hurricane maps and urged the community to be prepared, stay informed, and be vigilant.

Jaschen said the USVI is currently conducting its 2023 Hurricane Capstone Exercise. This exercise involves 15 hurricane focus area initiatives, with government agencies and the Federal Emergency Management Agency developing evaluation criteria. Operational integration is achieved using software, according to Jaschen, which brings together representatives from all 15 emergency support functions.

The director highlighted the participation of various agencies in the Capstone Exercise, including the VIPD, the V.I. National Guard, V.I. Fire and Emergency Medical Services, and the American Red Cross of the U.S. Virgin Islands. He also briefly outlined how the various agencies would work together in the event of a hurricane strike in the territory.

The VIPD, under Commissioner Ray Martinez's leadership, ensures public safety and coordinates emergency response efforts. The National Guard is prepared for multiple missions, such as route clearance, traffic control, transportation, communication, and support to the Territory Emergency Operations Centers. VIFEMS is responsible for fire fighting, urban search and rescue, and hazardous materials response, Jaschen said.

The American Red Cross will collaborate with the Department of Human Services to evaluate and operate shelters, provide meals, and distribute essential supplies. They also engage in community outreach and provide individual assistance in home recovery.

Jaschen stressed the importance of continuity of operations plans for businesses and the involvement of the private sector in response and recovery efforts. His testimony also acknowledged the critical role of amateur radio operators in emergency communications, with an upcoming communications exercise scheduled.

Committee Chair Senator Kenneth Gittens also expressed concerns about the condition and availability of generators at shelter sites. He expressed his discomfort with the current level of disaster preparedness and announced plans for a future hearing so that updates could be provided on the conditions of shelters and other concerns raised by the lawmakers.

Senators then questioned Jaschen on several aspects of hurricane readiness. Senator Franklin Johnson said the lack of primary shelters on the island of St. Croix was “unacceptable.” Like St. John, the Big Island only has two primary shelters, albeit with much larger capacities, and two secondary shelters to supplement. However, Johnson said that those secondary shelters were not properly resourced and should not even have been included on the list — particularly the Arthur Richards facility. “If the students could not use Arthur Richards for whatever condition was there, there’s no reason why we should be utilizing this and telling folks that this is a secondary shelter,” the senator insisted.