USVI, Wider Caribbean Could Benefit from UK Firm's Breakthrough in Sargassum Seaweed Management

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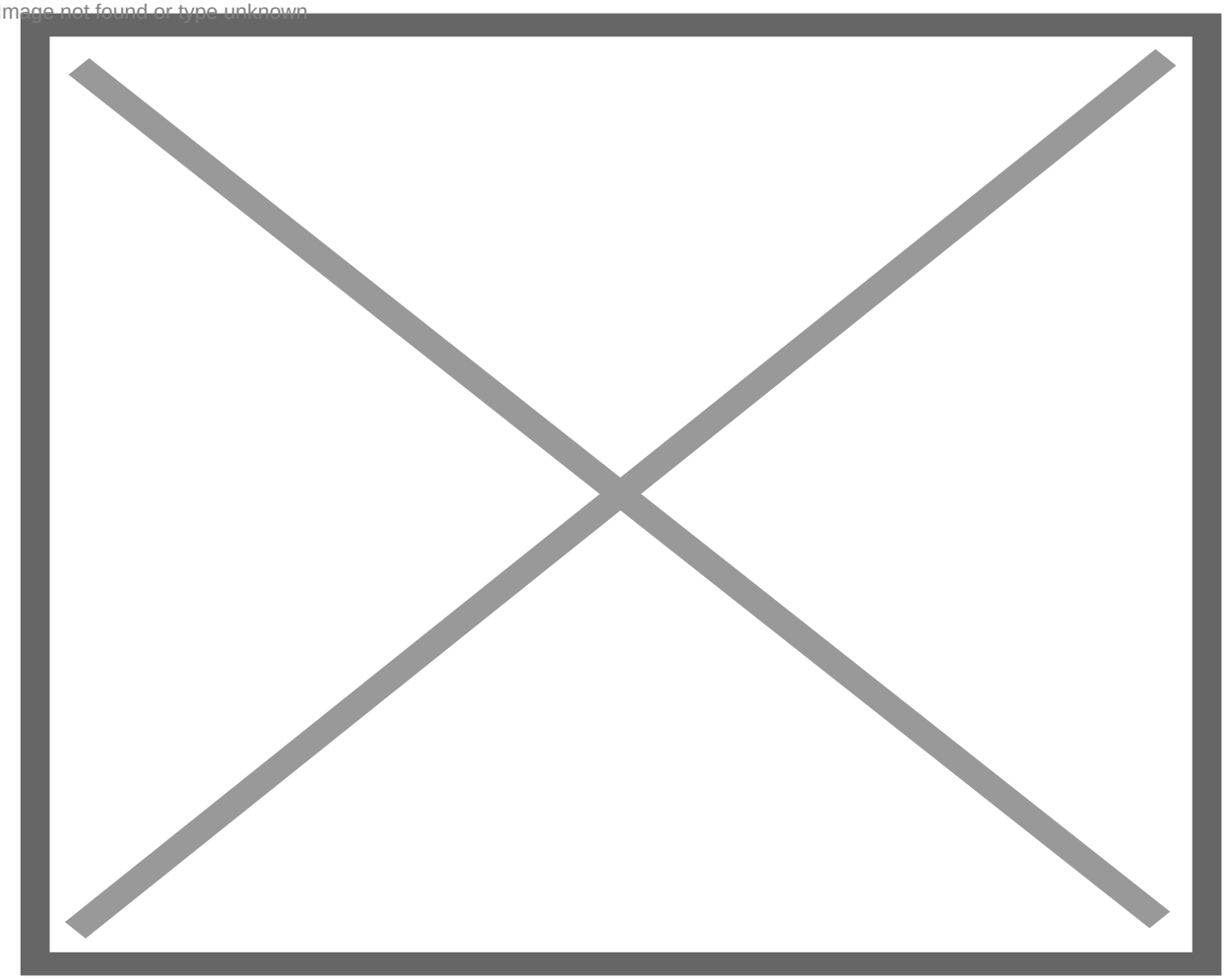
Ernice Gilbert June 07, 2023



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

Seafields, a UK-based aquaculture company, has announced the successful conclusion of its trials on the domestication and controlled growth of Sargassum seaweed, a breakthrough that holds significant implications for coastal areas like the U.S. Virgin Islands and the wider Caribbean region.

The U.S. Virgin Islands, among other coastal regions, have been grappling with the deleterious effects of vast amounts of Sargassum washing up on their shores every year since 2016. The annual onslaught of this seaweed, which forms the world's largest algal bloom known as the Great

Atlantic Sargassum Belt, has been a recurring environmental and economic burden.

Last year, the V.I. Dept. of Planning and Natural Resources Commissioner, Jean-Pierre Oriol, estimated that mitigating dense Sargassum blooms costs both the government and hoteliers about $25,000 a day. "Particularly over here on St Thomas, we don’t have large areas where we can separate or bury the seaweed. The removal process, which involves trucking small volumes to the landfill at a time due to its flammability when decaying, is about $25,000 a day," he explained.

However, the tide may be turning. Seafields' successful trials, conducted in Saint Vincent, are expected to help manage and regulate this distressing problem that contributes to greenhouse gas emissions and creates potential health hazards.

"We began trials in Saint Vincent over a year ago, starting with barrier tests," explained John Auckland, Seafields co-founder and CEO. "Our results far exceeded our expectations. The fact that the Sargassum flourished is a significant breakthrough, enabling us to move forward with plans to build farms that can capture and grow the seaweed at scale."

Seafields' unique 'catch and grow' approach is designed to intercept the Sargassum seaweed at sea before it reaches land. This method aims to significantly reduce the volume of seaweed reaching the shorelines, and provide a stable supply of Sargassum to industries that have recently cropped up around it, potentially stabilizing employment and manufacturing cycles in the region.

"Our farms will not only help catch a lot of Sargassum before it beaches, but we will also flatten out the spikes of its arrival into the region, allowing processing businesses to maintain a continuous manufacturing cycle while providing stable employment to the region," added Auckland.

Auckland noted that industries intending to use seaweed for biofuels, feedstocks, and alternatives to plastic are seeking a steady supply of Sargassum. Seafields' initiative could be a game-changer in providing this, while also combating the negative impacts of Sargassum on coastal regions.

In addition to the economic benefits, Dr. Franziska Elmer, Seafields Scientific Project Manager, reported an ecological bonus of the trials. The Sargassum farms attracted hundreds of juvenile fish, providing new spearfishing grounds for local fishermen and aiding their livelihood.

Seafields' ambitions go even further, with plans to use the domesticated Sargassum as a global solution for climate change. The company intends to sequester billions of tonnes of carbon dioxide annually by sinking part of their crop deep in the ocean.

The pioneering solution by Seafields promises significant environmental, economic, and social impacts, potentially marking a new era in Sargassum management, sustainable aquaculture, and climate change solutions.

This breakthrough comes just after the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Rural Development for Florida and the U.S. Virgin Islands State Director Lakeisha Hood announced the availability of grants to repair homes damaged by the water shortage and the health impacts from the unprecedented Sargassum seagrass