

BILL TO DEVELOP AN INTERAGENCY STORMWATER MANAGEMENT PLAN TO COMBAT THE WATER SHORTAGE FACING FARMERS HELD IN COMMITTEE

Date : September 16, 2019

St. Thomas- Members of the Committee on Economic Development, Regulations & Agriculture, chaired by Sen. Allison DeGazon, convened in a meeting at the Capitol Building on Monday, to receive testimony on several measures including Bill No. 33-0037 for the Department of Planning and Natural Resources (DPNR) to develop an Interagency Stormwater Management Plan to capture runoff water and channel it for the use of farmers. All measures approved will be forwarded to the Committee on Rules and Judiciary for further consideration.

The measure seeks to require the Department of Planning and Natural Resources (DPNR) to identify and rehabilitate five existing ponds in the St. Croix District and two existing ponds in the St. Thomas-St. John District to capture stormwater runoff to be used primarily by farmers; to allow DPNR to seek assistance from the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service, and to require DPNR to maintain rehabilitated ponds.

The Department of Planning and Natural Resources Commissioner Jean-Pierre Oriol stated that presently DPNR does not have an Interagency Stormwater Management Plan. Therefore, the bill will not be implemented within the required 180 days. Nonetheless, there are existing plans that focus on water management for coral reef watersheds. However, there is no stormwater management plan for existing ponds in both districts. "Over the last several years, DPNR developed watershed management plans with a focus on improved stormwater management to reduce inputs to our coastal areas. However, these plans have focused on our coral reef priority watersheds, which do not coincide with many of our prominent agricultural areas."

Sponsor of the bill Sen. DeGazon reiterated that the goal of the

measure is for DPNR to develop an Interagency Stormwater Management Plan and to identify funding sources. "Water is a precious resource. Instead of stormwater wasting away it should redirect to existing ponds to alleviate the shortage of water supply for Virgin Islands farmers. To execute this, a funding source is required."

Presently, the estimated cost to develop and implement an Interagency Stormwater Management Plan is unknown, according to the Virgin Islands Department of Agriculture Commissioner Positive Nelson. "There are many factors involved in this process. The implementation and cost of this plan include manpower, purchase of required equipment, collaborating with various agencies, identifying engineering firms, and ongoing maintenance," said Nelson. Another challenge is restoring water guts, specifically those with water erosion and lining them with rocks and concrete.

Ultimately, lawmakers voted to hold Bill No. 33-0037 in committee for further consideration. However, the following measures received a favorable recommendation:

- Bill No. 33-0122 - An Act amending title 7, chapter 1, subchapter I, section 2 of the Virgin Islands Code by expanding the definition of farming and by adding current industry standard terminology. Sen. Novelle E. Francis, Jr. proposed the bill.
- Bill No. 33-0123 - An act to earmark a percentage of the Government of the Virgin Islands budget to support local agriculture. Sen. Novelle E. Francis, Jr is the sponsor of the measure.

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