

Hurricane Season 2024 Preparedness Update



PRESENTED BY

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Submitted to

SENATOR KENNETH L. GITTENS, CHAIRMAN

Committee on Homeland Security, Justice, & Public Safety
Cleone H. Creque Legislative Conference Room, Island of St. John.

June 11, 2024

2 Senator Kenneth L. Gittens, Chairman of the Committee on Homeland Security, Justice, & Public
3 Safety and all other senators present, legislative staff and those in the viewing and listening
4 audience, good morning.

5 I am Daryl D. Jaschen, Director of the Virgin Islands Territorial Emergency Management Agency
6 (VITEMA). Present with me today are members of the Department of Human Services, the
7 Department of Public Works, and the VI Police Department. We are here today to present a
8 preparedness update on the Government of the US Virgin Islands for Hurricane Season 2024 which
9 lasts from 1 June through 30 November.

10 I, along with my other colleagues from the Department of Human Services, the Department of
11 Public Works and the VI Police Department, applaud this Committee for its interest in the
12 Government of the Virgin Islands, in partnership with FEMA, the Private Sector, and our
13 Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster (VOAD) members, in our preparedness to respond to
14 a Tropical Cyclone threat, no matter which island may be impacted for Hurricane Season 2024,
15 St. Croix, St. Thomas, St. John, or Water Island.

16 Be Prepared, Stay Informed, Be Vigilant

17 While it is important for every individual, business, and our faith-based community to be fully
18 prepared, with a plan, a kit, and if needed, curfew passes, I direct you to the VITEMA website at
19 <https://vitema.vi.gov> or Federal website www.ready.gov for details on individual and business
20 preparedness for disasters and emergencies in general. VITEMA, this year, has participated in
21 several community outreach Hurricane Readiness events beginning back in May, with Hurricane
22 Preparedness Week as well as several radio broadcasts. Please contact VITEMA if you would like
23 us to speak with your organization or co-host a radio broadcast.

24 Atlantic Hurricane Forecast

25 My focus for today will be on the combined preparedness of the Territory, to include our National
26 Guard and Federal Partners. Hurricane Season officially started on 1 June, and according to the
27 National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), the initial forecast for the Atlantic,
28 with an 85% confidence, indicates an above normal hurricane season, with between 17-25 named
29 storms, 8-13 becoming hurricanes, and of those, 4-7 becoming major hurricanes Category 3-5. The

30 historical averages are 14 named storms, 7 becoming hurricanes, and 3 becoming major hurricanes.
31 An updated Atlantic hurricane forecast from NOAA will be issued in August.

32 Resilience

33 I am confident in informing this committee that the Government of the US Virgin Islands and
34 FEMA Region 2 are well prepared for Hurricane Season 2024. We have incorporated many of the
35 lessons learned from the September 2017 Hurricanes Irma and Maria into our current plans, both
36 local and federal. As a Territory, our infrastructure is still recovering from the two Category 5
37 Hurricanes in 2017 and with the leadership from Governor Albert Bryan, Jr., and the Office of
38 Disaster Recovery Director Adrienne Williams-Octalien we are prioritizing our recovery efforts.
39 However, most of the recovery projects are still in Architecture & Engineering or just beginning
40 construction phase and will not be ready for us to benefit from in 2024. That is the reality we must
41 all face, but still not deter ourselves, our businesses, or our agencies from being resilience going
42 into and surviving through this Hurricane Season, as we are, VI Strong.

43 Hurricane Capstone Exercise

44 Under the Bryan-Roach administration, every year VITEMA and FEMA conduct a weeklong
45 Hurricane Capstone Exercise in the month of May which is 5-months in the planning. This year is
46 no different, and from 20-24 May VITEMA and FEMA Region 2 conducted our Hurricane
47 Capstone Exercise with activation of all three VITEMA Emergency Operations Centers, on St.
48 Croix, St. Thomas, and St. John and two Business Operations Centers, one on St. Croix and one
49 on St. Thomas. On 31 May, VITEMA and our lead Government of the Virgin Islands Emergency
50 Support Function Agencies, presented Governor Bryan with the results of the exercise and
51 received his guidance on further refining our plans and response efforts before the height of
52 Hurricane season, which is 15 August to 15 October. FEMA Region 2 leadership also attended the
53 briefing and provided additional recommendations and support on measures for refinement of
54 plans and procedures.

55 Coordinating Element

56 As a reminder, VITEMA is the single Government of the Virgin Islands agency with responsibility
57 of coordinating with local and federal stakeholders under a Territory State of Emergency, which
58 is initiated by Governor Bryan and may escalate to a Federal Major Disaster Declaration approved

59 by President Biden, before or after a Hurricane impacts the Territory, either in the St. Thomas / St
60 John or St. Croix districts, or both.

61 Hurricane Forecast Capabilities

62 Today, in 2024, the National Weather Service's technology of tropical cyclone modeling,
63 combined with the live data feeds from the Hurricane Hunters, flying reconnaissance missions
64 every 8 hours out of Henry E. Rohlsen Airport on St. Croix, as a tropical cyclone approaches the
65 Caribbean Lesser Antilles, provide us, and the world, an even better forecast from what was
66 available in 2017 with Hurricanes Irma and Maria. Governor Bryan and many individuals in the
67 Territory, almost simultaneously, will know when the Territory is threatened, 72-96 hours / 3-4
68 days prior to the onset of Tropical Storm force winds. Tropical waves come off Cape Verde Islands
69 located just off the west coast of Africa, 2,740 miles East of the US Virgin Islands, every 2-3 days
70 during the height of Hurricane Season. Any one of those waves has the potential to develop into a
71 major hurricane Category 3 -5 with wind strength starting at 111 miles per hour.

72 Agency Responsibilities

73 Key areas of focus for the Government of the Virgin Islands in preparation for Hurricane Season
74 include:

- 75 • Department of Human Services with Mass Care consisting of Congregate Shelters, Points
76 of Distribution, Senior Registry, and Individual Assistance.
- 77 • Department of Health with Patient Movement and Evacuation, to include 244 individuals
78 who receive Dialysis throughout the Territory, and Medical Special Needs Shelters.
- 79 • Water and Power Authority with power restoration and temporary emergency power and
80 water distribution.
- 81 • VI Waste Management Authority and the Department of Public Works on route clearance,
82 debris removal, and final disposition of green waste. It is important for this committee to
83 understand that the US Army Corps of Engineers has indicated that no green waste will
84 be transported outside the territory and Governor Bryan will need to identify the best
85 options of addressing the hundreds of thousands of cubic yards of green waste which will
86 be generated as result of the hurricane impact to the territory. VI Public Works also

87 manages the VITRAN public transportation system for moving medical special needs
88 individuals to shelters operated by the Department of Health,

89 • VI Port Authority with Airport and Seaport closing and openings, to include the ferry
90 between St. Thomas and St. John.

91 • VI Police Department with Public Safety and the importance of establishing immediate
92 capacity for surge operations with our own National Guard and law enforcement officers
93 from other states which support Safety and Security of the Territory. This includes the
94 coordinated used of drones in the Territory for establishing priority of efforts in saving
95 lives and preserving property.

96 • Virgin Islands National Guard and other State National Guard units to augment and surge
97 the needs of the Territory with Shelter Operations, Traffic Control Points, Points of
98 Distribution, Medical Evacuation, Route Clearance and air bridges for logistical
99 operations between districts. The Virgin Islands National Guard moves several military
100 vehicles from St. Thomas to St. John to support working with the Department of Public
101 Works on route clearance.

102 Distance and Time

103 Due to the distance and time for response from the mainland, FEMA Region 2 and VITEMA
104 anticipate it will take between 10-14 days before Department of Defense forces arrive and another
105 10-14 days before other State National Guard forces arrive to the Territory. This is a significant
106 message for this Committee and everyone in the US Virgin Islands to understand. Help is coming
107 but we will need to be self-sufficient for 10-14 days before the arrival of additional response teams.
108 Power line repair crews and telecommunications providers will take even longer to mobilize and
109 move their personnel and equipment to the Territory.

110 Points of Distribution

111 For some good news, FEMA has both 1-liter sized boxed water, with a shelf life of 10-years, and
112 shelf stable meals, some of which are low sodium, here in the Territory with supplies sufficient to
113 support up to 10-days. This is a marked change from how conditions were in 2017, where all the
114 FEMA commodities, to include emergency temporary power generators, were kept in Puerto Rico.
115 The water and meals are planned to be available to the community through VITEMA starting 5-

116 days following the Federal Hurricane Major Disaster Declaration. Both our local Virgin Islands
117 National Guard and the Department of Human Services will play a key role in these Points of
118 Distribution (PODs). They will operate two (2) PODs per island, which has the capacity to
119 distribute 5,000 meals per day per POD. These PODS will only operate until the private businesses
120 are able to re-open.

121 Emergency Communications

122 Thanks in a large part to Senator Gittens sponsoring the Auxiliary Communications bill last year
123 and Governor Bryan signing the bill into law, there is a formal partnership between VITMEA and
124 the Amateur Radio “Ham” Operators on each island in providing, under activation by VITEMA,
125 emergency radio communications both within and between our islands. This formal agreement
126 ensures the availability of Amateur Radio Operator volunteers in performing emergency
127 communications without fear of personal liability, such as an antenna falling and injuring an
128 individual or property. Members of the Auxiliary Communications will also have curfew passes
129 and be positioned at the VITMEA EOCs until their services are no longer needed, as determined
130 by the Director of VITEMA. The Bureau of Information Technology completed its annual
131 emergency communications drill during the Capstone Exercise. The drill included validation of
132 the 9-1-1 ECC trunking system tower generators, operational status of all 30-satellite phones, and
133 working with the private telecommunications group of Liberty and AT&T in deployment of mobile
134 FirstNet emergency responder equipment. VITEMA has over 21,000 individuals signed up for
135 Alert VI which provides mass messaging to mobile or land-line customers. Alert VI is also linked
136 to the National Weather Service in Puerto Rico, where they will send out the official Hurricane
137 Watch Alert, 48-hours prior to the Hurricane impacting the US Virgin Islands, and a Hurricane
138 Warning Alert, 36-hours prior. Sign-up for Alert VI by visiting the VITEMA website or after one
139 of our community outreach events. You can choose to receive the alert messages in English or
140 Spanish.

141 Closing

142 As I mentioned at the start, it takes VITEMA and FEMA Region 2 a good five months each year,
143 from January to May, just to plan for our Hurricane Capstone Exercise. We are two agencies, one
144 Territorial, and one Federal with the mission of jointly preparing for, responding to, and recovering
145 from major disasters in the US Virgin Islands. This is what we do full-time. Our other agencies,

146 stakeholders, volunteers and even private sector leaders look to us for guidance and direction. Both
147 Governor Bryan and President Biden expect VITEMA and FEMA to do our jobs well and work
148 with a sense of purpose and Unity of Effort when the need arises to Save Lives and Preserve
149 Property. The US Virgin Islands will need lots of assistance in responding to the devastating impact
150 of a major hurricane. While each passing year takes us further from the memory of Hurricane Irma
151 and Hurricane Maria, it also allows us to continue to hone and refine our plans, conduct exercises,
152 and train new staff on being resilience. I want to thank all the members of VITEMA and our first
153 responders who know that they must prepare themselves and their families now, in this month of
154 June, because we will be required to show up and perform our mission without faltering, alongside
155 all our other key Emergency Support Function agencies, volunteers, and our federal partners.

156 Thank you, Senator Gittens and the entire Committee on Homeland Security, Justice, and Public
157 Safety, for this opportunity to address VITEMA's preparedness for Hurricane Season 2024. I am
158 ready to answer any questions you may have at this time.