



COMMITTEE ON 
**DISASTER RECOVERY,
INFRASTRUCTURE, AND
PLANNING**

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Good morning, Senator Marise C. James Esq., Chairperson of the Committee on Disaster Recovery, Infrastructure, and Planning; members of the Committee; fellow Senators; and members of the viewing and listening audience.

My name is Rueben Jennings, and I am the Assistant Commissioner of the Department of Public Works. I appear before you today to provide an overview of the Department's hurricane season readiness efforts and the critical role we play in supporting disaster preparedness, emergency response, and recovery operations throughout the Territory. Working in coordination with VITEMA and our territorial and federal partners, the Department remains focused on protecting critical infrastructure, maintaining transportation networks, assisting with mass movement, if needed, and ensuring resources are strategically positioned to support our communities before, during, and after storm events.

The Department of Public Works plays a critical role in ensuring the Territory is prepared to respond to and recover from hurricane events. Our responsibilities span transportation and roadway readiness, infrastructure protection, mass movement, debris management, damage assessment, and coordination with local and federal partners. The following provides a summary of the Department's preparedness efforts and operational responsibilities during hurricane season.

TRANSPORTATION AND ROADWAY READINESS

Preparation for hurricane season begins well before the first storm enters the region. Each year, the Department conducts assessments of critical transportation corridors, drainage systems, bridges, and roadway infrastructure throughout the Territory.

The Department conducts routine inspections and maintenance of critical drainage infrastructure, including guts, culverts, swales, and drainage systems throughout the Territory. These activities help reduce flooding, protect public infrastructure, and improve roadway safety during periods of heavy rainfall. Maintenance efforts are prioritized based on operational needs, field assessments, and areas identified as vulnerable during storm events.

In addition, the Department continuously evaluates critical transportation corridors and roadways to identify potential vulnerabilities and ensure accessibility for emergency responders, utility crews, healthcare personnel, and residents before and after a storm event.

INFRASTRUCTURE RESILIENCE INITIATIVES

The Department works proactively to identify and address conditions that could impact transportation assets and government facilities during severe weather events.

Engineering personnel conduct pre and post storm field assessments of roads, bridges, drainage systems, and public facilities to identify vulnerabilities and prioritize maintenance

and repair activities. Through these efforts, the Department works to enhance infrastructure resilience and support the continuity of critical transportation networks before, during, and after storm events.

SAND DISTRIBUTION AND COMMUNITY PREPAREDNESS

In partnership with VITEMA, the Department supports sand distribution efforts throughout the Territory. On scheduled dates and pre-determined locations, DPW and other key stakeholders provide Blue Sky sandbag distribution where residents receive up to six pre-filled sandbags per household. In partnership with VIFEMS, VITEMA and the Governor's Office, sandbags are delivered to the disabled, elderly and shut in.

Before landfall, designated distribution sites are established to provide sand, bags, and filling equipment for government agencies and residents preparing for potential storm impacts. Pre-filled sandbags are reserved for elderly and physically challenged individuals to ensure vulnerable populations have access to essential, last minute storm preparedness resources.

DEBRIS MANAGEMENT AND EMERGENCY RESPONSE

A key component of the Department's preparedness efforts is maintaining its Roadside Clearance and Debris Removal Action Plans.

Department personnel, roadside contractors, and emergency contractors are strategically positioned throughout the islands to support rapid response operations. Priority locations include hospitals, health centers, fire stations, police stations, and other critical facilities necessary to support life-safety and emergency response operations.

Following a storm event, crews focus on opening roadways, restoring access to critical facilities, and supporting emergency response agencies. Once primary transportation routes are cleared, operations transition to debris removal and disposal in accordance with local and federal requirements. DPW currently has emergency contracts for generator repair, roof repair, debris monitoring, and route clearance on all three islands. In May, contractors participated in tabletop exercises to prepare and expose possible gaps in emergency services. We anticipate having refresher trainings in the coming months for our in-house personnel and contractors just ahead of the peak hurricane season.

RECOVERY OPERATIONS

The Department's Engineering and Construction Management teams conduct preliminary damage assessments following a storm to evaluate impacts to roads, bridges, government facilities, and other public infrastructure.

These assessments provide critical information to the Governor, VITEMA, and federal agencies regarding disaster impacts and potential eligibility for federal assistance programs.

INTERAGENCY COORDINATION AND EMERGENCY SUPPORT FUNCTIONS

The Department works closely with VITEMA, the Virgin Islands Police Department, Virgin Islands Fire and Emergency Medical Services, the Virgin Islands Water and Power Authority, the Virgin Islands National Guard, and other territorial and federal partners before, during, and after storm events.

As part of the Territorial Emergency Operations Plan, the Department supports several Emergency Support Functions, including transportation, public works and engineering, debris management, damage assessment, and continuity of government operations. VITRAN provides mass transportation support once requested through the Emergency Operations Center. I want to take this opportunity to encourage our elderly, disabled and medically challenged population to register with VITRAN Plus paratransit services as only registered residents are eligible for emergency transportation. Through year-round planning, maintenance, and coordination, the Department remains committed to strengthening the Territory's resilience and ensuring we are prepared to respond when our communities need us most.

Madam Chair, this concludes my testimony. Thank you for the opportunity to provide an overview of the Department's hurricane preparedness efforts. I remain available to answer any questions the Committee may have.