



VIRGIN ISLANDS
WATER AND POWER AUTHORITY

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TESTIMONY OF DON GREGOIRE
INTERIM CHIEF OPERATING OFFICER OF WATER
OF THE
VIRGIN ISLANDS WATER AND POWER AUTHORITY
TO THE
COMMITTEE ON DISASTER RECOVERY,
INFRASTRUCTURE & PLANNING MEETING

June 30, 2026

Good day, Honorable Marise C. James, Esq., Committee Chair on Disaster Recovery, Infrastructure & Planning, other Honorable Senators present, and the listening and viewing audience. I am Don Gregoire, Interim Chief Operating Officer of Water and Incident Commander of the Virgin Islands Water and Power Authority (hereinafter “WAPA” or “the Authority”). Joining me today are members of the Authority’s management team: Chief Operating Officer of Electric Systems, Lemuel Lavinier, and Chief Administrative Officer Anthony D. Thomas.

Thank you for the invitation to appear before you today alongside the other esteemed testifiers. We are here to provide a comprehensive update on WAPA’s territorial emergency preparedness and hurricane season readiness, including the status of continuity of operations planning, responsibilities under the Emergency Support Function (ESF) framework of the Territorial Emergency Operations Plan and interagency coordination efforts to support disaster preparedness, response, recovery, and mitigation activities throughout the Territory.

As Incident Commander, my role is to oversee the Authority's emergency preparedness and response efforts to ensure we are positioned to protect our employees, our infrastructure, and the people of the Virgin Islands before, during, and after a storm event. While hurricane preparedness is often viewed as a seasonal activity, for WAPA, much like the other testifiers,

it is a year-round commitment that involves planning, training, infrastructure improvements, resource management, and close coordination with our local and federal partners.

The Authority enters the 2026 hurricane season with significant improvements to our overall readiness compared to previous years. Over the last year, the Authority has continued to advance multiple FEMA-funded mitigation and reconstruction projects, translating disaster recovery funding into tangible resilience improvements that will benefit the Territory for decades to come. Wooden poles have been replaced with 10,213 composite poles designed to withstand winds of up to 200 miles per hour. These poles are stronger, more durable, and better suited for the harsh environmental conditions of the Virgin Islands.

In addition, approximately 40 percent of critical portions of our electrical distribution system have been converted underground, reducing exposure to high winds, falling vegetation, and flying debris. WAPA has completed several undergrounding projects within the last year, including Hannah's Rest Phase I, Feeder 8B; the St. Croix Central High School to St. Croix Agricultural Fairgrounds corridor on Feeder 9B; and Feeder 5A on St. Thomas. Additional undergrounding projects scheduled for 2026 include Queens Street in Christiansted on Feeder 1A, Feeder 9A on St. Thomas, which is expected to begin at the end of June, and Feeder 9E on St. John, which is anticipated to begin in late July.

On the water side, WAPA has leveraged EPA funding to make targeted investments in water infrastructure improvements aimed at reducing water loss, strengthening system reliability, and enhancing resilience during emergency events. Over the past year, the Authority has completed two water system rehabilitation projects in Campo Rico and Hannah's Rest, replacing 41,520 linear feet (7.9 miles) of aging water mains with new PVC piping designed to improve service reliability and reduce the frequency of leaks and service interruptions.

Since last year's hurricane preparedness update, WAPA has expanded its vegetation management efforts and established a dedicated tree-trimming crew in each district. These crews are prioritizing preventative maintenance along critical transmission and distribution corridors.

The Authority continues to operate under an Incident Command System that aligns with territorial and federal emergency management frameworks. Our emergency response plans have been refined based on lessons learned from previous storms and are supported by ongoing coordination with VITEMA, FEMA, the Department of Energy, local first responders, healthcare facilities, airports, ports, and other critical agencies.

Over the past year, WAPA personnel have participated in emergency preparedness training, Incident Command System refresher courses, and coordination exercises with territorial and federal partners to strengthen response capabilities and improve operational readiness.

WAPA remains an active participant in the Emergency Operations Center (EOC) as part of Emergency Support Function 12, ensuring utility operations remain fully integrated into the Territory's overall emergency response efforts.

From a resource perspective, we have worked diligently to improve our emergency inventories and staging capabilities. Notwithstanding our best efforts, considerable financial resources spent on delivering energy to customers remain uncollected thereby restricting those efforts. The following critical materials are available within the territory, poles, transformers, and bare aluminum conductor wire. While inventory challenges remain, the Authority has completed the Geographic Information System (GIS) project, allowing for faster analysis and restoration planning of affected areas following storm impacts.

WAPA has strengthened its mutual aid planning through ongoing coordination with the American Public Power Association and secured emergency line crew contracts with Haugland Virgin Islands and BBC Electrical Services. Both contractors have an extensive knowledge of the Virgin Islands' electrical system, terrain, logistics, and operational challenges, providing an added advantage during emergency response and recovery.

Equally important is our commitment to timely, accurate, and transparent communication with the public. WAPA has built a layered communications strategy that includes the WAPA Alert system, reaching more than 14,400 subscribers; a social media audience of more than 33,300 followers; regular website updates; multilingual messaging; and trusted partnerships with local media, including WSTA, WLDV, WSTX, Reef Broadcasting, and WTJX. This multi-channel approach ensures customers receive critical information quickly and consistently, including storm preparedness guidance, safety advisories, outage notifications, restoration updates, and other emergency information.

While we have made substantial progress, it is important to be transparent about the challenges we continue to face entering this hurricane season.

The Authority's most significant concern remains our financial position. Limited cash reserves continue to impact our ability to build emergency inventories to desired levels, purchase additional fuel reserves, accelerate fleet repairs, and maintain sufficient financial flexibility to respond to multiple storm events. The cost of materials and equipment continues to rise, and many critical electrical and water system components now require extended procurement lead times. These realities create operational risks that cannot be ignored when preparing for a potentially active hurricane season.

Despite the known challenges, fleet readiness remains a focus of WAPA's hurricane preparedness efforts. The Authority recently added a new bucket truck and currently has ten

operational bucket trucks across the Territory. An additional seven bucket trucks have been ordered and will be deployed upon delivery.

To support transmission and distribution operations, WAPA's fleet currently includes eight (8) bucket trucks, three (3) digger derricks, two (2) pressure diggers, and two (2) tree-trimming trucks. Through grant funding, three (3) additional tree-trimming trucks and nine (9) additional bucket trucks have been ordered to further strengthen vegetation management and storm response capabilities.

Garage operations continue to prioritize preventive maintenance, repairs, parts procurement, and technical training to improve equipment reliability and reduce downtime. However, the aged fleet assets affect equipment availability, and replacement efforts remain ongoing.

To supplement local resources during major storm events, WAPA maintains contingency plans that include contractor support, mutual aid agreements, and emergency equipment-sharing arrangements.

Water storage levels remain a challenge, particularly on St. Croix, where recurring major leaks impact system operations and available storage capacity.

Fuel inventory remains a significant operational challenge due to financial constraints and operational demands. While current reserves provide operational capability in the event of a storm, additional reserves would further strengthen the Authority's ability to sustain services during prolonged recovery periods.

Despite these challenges, I am confident that WAPA is better prepared today than at any point in recent history. Our infrastructure is stronger, our emergency response plans are more mature, our partnerships are more established, and our workforce is better trained to respond when called upon. We have learned valuable lessons from past storms and have translated those lessons into meaningful improvements across our organization.

Should a storm impact the Territory, our restoration efforts will remain established priorities focused on protecting public health and safety. Hospitals, emergency response facilities, airports, seaports, water and wastewater systems, shelters, and communications infrastructure will receive priority attention before restoration efforts expand to the broader community. This approach ensures that critical services necessary for life, safety, and recovery are restored as quickly as possible.

In closing, WAPA remains committed to fulfilling its mission of providing reliable utility services to all Virgin Islanders while continuously improving our resilience against future storms. We recognize the challenges that remain, particularly regarding financial resources,

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fleet readiness, and inventory levels, but we also recognize the significant progress that has been made. Our team stands ready to respond, recover, and restore services as safely and efficiently as possible throughout the 2026 hurricane season.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify here today, and we look forward to your questions.