



THE UNITED STATES VIRGIN ISLANDS
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Teri Helenese — Testimony Before the 36th Legislature of the Virgin Islands on a Resolution Honoring U.S. Senator Mike Crapo

Good morning, Senate President Milton E. Potter, Committee on Government Operations, Veterans Affairs and Consumer Protection Chairman Avery L. Lewis, Members of the 36th Legislature, Father Modeste Didgwou, Father Michael Kosak, Father Louis Kemayou, Father Anthony Abraham, Deacon Arnold Helenese (Dad), the Catholic Diocese, all churches and faith leaders, legislative staff, ladies and gentlemen in the Chamber, and the viewing and listening audience, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you. I am Teri Helenese, Director of State and Federal Relations and Washington Representative for Governor Albert Bryan Jr.

It is an honor to return to this dignified institution. In this place, I learned a great deal about public service, the importance of respecting processes, and the value of bipartisan cooperation in a small community.

My work on Rum Cover-Over began thirty years ago as a junior staffer, when Governor Roy Lester Schneider entrusted me, at just 23 years old, with responsibility with his team in Washington, DC, for federal advocacy on this issue. I continued that work through the Bryan Roach administration. I also had the privilege of serving as Director of Public Affairs during the 25th Legislature under the leadership of Senate President David Jones and this august body, working on both St. Croix and St. Thomas.

Those years shaped how I understand government: listen first, respect differences, honor process, and build coalitions rooted in facts and integrity. While my federal experience began in local government, much of my professional life has also been spent in the private sector. That balance between public service and private sector experience has grounded me in a practical, steady approach to federal work, one that has guided me for decades.

The permanent increase of the Rum Cover-Over rate from \$10.50 to \$13.25 per proof gallon, signed into law on July 4, 2025, represents the culmination of decades of work. For the first time in more than 50 years, Rum Cover-Over funding is permanent, not temporary, not extended, not uncertain. This permanency delivers long term fiscal stability that our Territory has not seen in generations. It provides \$1 billion in combined revenue to the Virgin Islands and Puerto Rico every decade. It stabilizes pensions, protects retirees, creates jobs, funds public education and healthcare, and gives our government long term fiscal certainty.

As I reflect on this journey, I am guided by a principle rooted in Hebrews 13:16: to do good and to share with others, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God. In many ways, that is what this work has required—quiet consistency, steady partnership, and a commitment to serving others over the long term. This, to me, represents faith in action.

This achievement was made possible through the principled leadership of Senator Mike Crapo, whose relationship with the Virgin Islands began two decades ago through the foresight of Kevin Callwood. Not only does Kevin come from one of the most respected families on St. Thomas, but his ability to connect our islands to national leadership has proven invaluable. For that we are deeply grateful. Kevin introduced Senator Crapo to our people, our challenges, and our hopes. That early engagement laid the foundation for a relationship of trust that has guided this partnership over the years.

Senator Crapo honored that trust at every step. Every time Governor Albert Bryan Jr. traveled to Washington, Senator Crapo met with him promptly and engaged deeply on tax policy, pensions, infrastructure, and fiscal health. Senator Crapo also traveled to the Virgin Islands to meet our families, go fishing with Governor Bryan, walk our shores, and understand our concerns firsthand. That level of personal engagement is rare and invaluable.

In 2021, when Congress failed to pass tax extenders, the Virgin Islands could have panicked. Instead, we worked together. The Rum Cover-Over Working Group, which I am honored to lead, conducted extensive outreach to the House Ways and Means Committee and the Senate Finance Committee. We walked Members through the impact on retirees, pensions, infrastructure, and debt. Those discussions provided the clarity and confidence Members needed, and importantly, they gave Senator Crapo the foundation to write the billion dollar, decade long permanency directly into the bill.

Then came the moment that tested us all: a draft Senate bill circulated without Rum Cover-Over included. It was disappointing, but drafts change. I reminded the Rum Cover-Over Working Group that we had strong allies. The next morning, at a breakfast honoring Senator Crapo, I publicly acknowledged the omission. Senator Crapo stood and said: “Teri is correct. The bill is a draft, and I will do everything I can to write Rum Cover-Over into the Big Beautiful Bill.” Senator Crapo kept his word.

This is bipartisan partnership at its finest. Senator Crapo, A Republican, has supported the Virgin Islands through EDC reforms, the RT Park, the Captain Morgan Distillery, hurricane recovery, and the 2017 Tax Reform Bill. His commitment has been consistent, thoughtful, and genuine. He stands as the greatest champion the Virgin Islands has ever had in the United States Senate.

I also want to recognize and thank our regional partners in this effort: Delegate Stacey Plaskett, whose work in keeping Rum Cover-Over on the House of Representatives, and House Ways and Means Agendas, contributed to this victory. And I acknowledge and thank Puerto Rico’s Governor Jenniffer González-Colón for her bipartisan engagement throughout the process.

And for their advocacy in Congress on the Rum Cover-Over Working Group, as well as sustaining the rum industries growth and prosperity of our retirees, I would be remiss if I did not thank Diageo, their Captain Morgan Rum, and Cruzan Rum, the major rum companies operating on St. Croix. Their support is invaluable and has helped to pave the way for this moment.

Today, we honor Senator Mike Crapo with deep respect and profound gratitude. His leadership has strengthened our fiscal foundation, protected our retirees, and ensured stability for generations of Virgin Islanders. I thank Governor Albert Bryan Jr. for his steadfast advocacy, I thank Kevin Callwood for the introduction that changed history, and I thank this 36th Legislature, under your leadership, President Potter and Senator Lewis, for recognizing a man whose partnership reflects the very best of American public life.

Senator Crapo kept faith with the Virgin Islands. And today, on behalf of a grateful people, we honor him.

Thank you, Senator Lewis. I am available for any questions.