

**TESTIMONY FOR THE COMMITTEE ON HEALTH,
HOSPITALS AND HUMAN SERVICES**

VIRGIN ISLANDS WASTE MANAGEMENT AUTHORITY

36TH LEGISLATURE OF THE VIRGIN ISLANDS

WEDNESDAY, JULY 22, 2026

10:00 A.M.

**HANNIBAL “MIKE” WARE, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR
VIRGIN ISLANDS WASTE MANAGEMENT AUTHORITY**

Good day and thank you for the opportunity to present an overview of the Virgin Islands Waste Management Authority's ongoing efforts to strengthen the Territory's wastewater infrastructure.

My name is Walton Keith Smith, and I serve as the Chief of Wastewater for the Virgin Islands Waste Management Authority.

Our wastewater system is one of the most critical public health assets in the U.S. Virgin Islands. It serves the islands of St. Thomas, St. Croix, and St. John through approximately **240 miles of sewer pipelines, over 4,200 manholes, 31 pump stations, and eight wastewater treatment plants**. Much of this infrastructure has exceeded its intended service life and now requires increasing levels of maintenance while continuing to provide uninterrupted service to our communities.

FEMA has concluded that our wastewater infrastructure is beyond repair. The system cannot simply be patched or rehabilitated—it requires a comprehensive rebuild. Decades of aging infrastructure, deferred investment, and disaster impacts have left us operating a system that has exceeded its intended service life. Every day, we confront deteriorated pipelines, failing pump stations, collapsing manholes, excessive stormwater infiltration, unreliable power, limited financial resources, and growing operational demands, all while ensuring the uninterrupted collection and treatment of wastewater to safeguard public health and the environment.

I respectfully submit for the record the attached Document entitled "**Managing Today's Challenges While Building Tomorrow's Infrastructure.**" This document provides a comprehensive overview of the current condition of the Virgin Islands' wastewater infrastructure, the operational challenges facing the Authority, and our strategic plan for improving system reliability while continuing to protect public health and the environment.

Public Health Risks:

Perhaps the most important issue before us is that wastewater infrastructure is fundamentally a public health system.

When sewer infrastructure fails, untreated sewage can be released into neighbourhoods, streets, storm drains, beaches, waterways, and residential communities. These Sanitary Sewer Overflows (SSOs) expose residents and visitors to bacteria, viruses, parasites, and other disease-causing organisms that can lead to gastrointestinal illnesses, skin and eye infections, respiratory irritation, and other serious health conditions. Young children, the elderly, pregnant women, and individuals with weakened immune systems are especially vulnerable.

These overflows also contaminate coastal waters, damage marine ecosystems, force beach closures, create offensive odors, diminish quality of life, and increase cleanup costs for government agencies. Every wastewater failure represents not only an operational challenge but also a direct threat to public health.

For this reason, every investment in wastewater infrastructure is also an investment in protecting our communities, preserving our natural resources, and safeguarding the health of everyone who

lives in or visits the Virgin Islands.

Our Response:

Recognizing these challenges, the Wastewater Division launched the **Wastewater Optimization Program** in 2024 to improve operational performance while laying the foundation for long-term infrastructure reliability. Through the federal recovery process, approximately **\$3.2 billion** has been identified for **Prudent Replacement** of this critical infrastructure. While this represents a once-in-a-generation opportunity to rebuild our wastewater system, the replacement cannot occur overnight. Planning, design, environmental review, procurement, and construction will take years to complete.

During this transition, the Authority must continue operating an aging and deteriorated system that experiences frequent failures, while simultaneously preparing for the modern system that will replace it. This means responding to today's emergencies, protecting public health, maintaining regulatory compliance, and minimizing service disruptions—all while building the organizational structure, workforce, operational systems, maintenance programs, asset management capabilities, and technical standards required to successfully operate and sustain a completely new wastewater infrastructure.

The Wastewater Optimization Program was created to bridge this gap. It ensures that we are not only keeping today's system functioning as reliably as possible but also building the organizational capacity necessary to successfully receive, operate, and maintain the new FEMA-funded wastewater system for decades to come.

The program is built upon two complementary pillars:

- **Administrative Effectiveness**, which strengthens our workforce, fleet management, GIS, computerized maintenance management systems (CMMS), emergency response, workplace safety, communication, financial sustainability, and proactive maintenance.
- **Infrastructure Reliability**, which emphasizes proper planning, engineering, standardization, quality construction, operational readiness, asset management, and long-term strategic investment.

Together, these initiatives are transforming how we manage the Territory's wastewater system—from reacting to failures toward preventing failures through better planning, improved data, standardized processes, and smarter investments.

Progress:

Although considerable work remains, the Wastewater Optimization Program has established measurable performance tracking, strengthened emergency preparedness, expanded preventive maintenance activities, improved asset visibility, enhanced operational accountability, and created a framework for long-term infrastructure renewal. These improvements position the Authority to maximize the value of future capital investments while improving day-to-day operations.

Continued Investment:

Maintenance alone cannot overcome decades of infrastructure deterioration. Long-term reliability requires sustained investment in rehabilitation, modernization, replacement of aging assets, improved electrical reliability, resilient pump stations, upgraded treatment facilities, and modern asset management technologies.

Continued legislative support will ensure that the Authority can effectively operate, maintain, and protect the new wastewater infrastructure being funded through FEMA's capital replacement program. While federal funding provides the resources to replace our irreparable wastewater system, it does not fund the ongoing maintenance, staffing, equipment, and operational capabilities required to keep that infrastructure reliable. Sustained local investment is essential to reduce emergency failures, maintain regulatory compliance, protect public health and the environment, and preserve the value of this historic federal investment

Timeline:

Under the Prudent Replacement approach, projects progress through three key phases: Assessment, Engineering and Design, and Construction. Most assessments have been completed, and several major wastewater infrastructure projects are now advancing through Engineering and Design, with some expected to enter construction this year. Based on current projections, and barring unforeseen circumstances, full replacement of the wastewater system is anticipated by 2034.

Closing:

Members of the Committee, the attached presentation demonstrates that the Waste Management Authority has developed a comprehensive strategy to address today's operational challenges while building a more reliable wastewater system for tomorrow. While Prudent replacement is underway, our responsibility is clear: maintain the existing irreparable wastewater system to protect public health today while transforming it into a resilient, reliable system for generations to come.

Long-term reliability depends on replacing deteriorated infrastructure, upgrading pump stations and treatment facilities, improving resilience to storms and power interruptions, and adopting modern asset management practices.

The expected outcomes of this program include:

- Improved system reliability and operational resilience.
- Reduced sanitary sewer overflows and emergency failures.
- Better protection of public health and the environment.
- Lower lifecycle maintenance costs.
- Improved regulatory compliance.
- Increased transparency and accountability.

- More efficient use of local and federal funding.
- A modern wastewater system capable of supporting future economic growth throughout the Virgin Islands.

On behalf of Executive Director, Mr. Hannibal “Mike” Ware and the dedicated employees of the Virgin Islands Waste Management Authority, I thank you for your continued support and your commitment to protecting the health, environment, and quality of life of the people of the Virgin Islands.

I appreciate the opportunity to testify before you today and respectfully welcome any questions the Committee may have.