



GOVERNMENT OF
THE UNITED STATES VIRGIN ISLANDS
OFFICE OF THE GOVERNOR



VIRGIN ISLANDS FIRE and EMERGENCY MEDICAL SERVICES

"Providing Safety, Service, and Satisfaction"

Good morning, Honorable Chairman Senator Blyden, members of the Committee on Housing, Transportation, and Telecommunications, fellow testifiers, all first responders, and the viewing and listening audiences. My name is Antonio Stevens, Director of the Virgin Islands Fire and Emergency Services. Thank you for the invitation to be a part of today's discussion.

On behalf of the Virgin Islands Fire and Emergency Medical Services, I am pleased to offer testimony in strong support of Bill No. 36-0074, an Act amending Title 20 of the Virgin Islands Code to establish the "Virgin Islands Roadside Property Maintenance and Vegetation Act."

For many years, overgrown vegetation along public roadways has posed a significant and ongoing hazard in our territory. Our personnel have repeatedly responded to fires ignited by tree limbs and brush interfering with public utility lines. In numerous instances, VIFEMS has also been required to remain on standby while the Virgin Islands Water and Power Authority addresses sparking or compromised electrical lines caused by unmanaged vegetation. These situations not only strain resources but also place both emergency responders and utility crews at unnecessary risk.

This legislation represents a practical and long-overdue solution to a problem that has been overlooked for far too long. By requiring property owners to properly maintain roadside vegetation and prevent obstructions to public roads and utility infrastructure, this measure directly enhances public safety, reduces fire risk, and improves emergency response conditions.

Importantly, the bill also ensures accountability across the board, including for properties owned or controlled by the Government of the Virgin Islands. Holding all property owners to the same standard is critical to achieving consistent and effective vegetation management throughout the territory.

From an operational standpoint, this measure will help reduce hazardous conditions faced by both VIFEMS personnel and WAPA crews, ultimately leading to fewer emergency incidents and safer working environments.

We commend the sponsor, Senator Kenneth L. Gittens, for his leadership in addressing this critical issue. His background as a first responder and his prior service within in the Virgin Islands Territorial Emergency Management Agency's Emergency Operations Center as an Emergency Service Coordinator during storm seasons bring valuable firsthand insight to this effort.

We do know that there's a saying that no legislative bill is ever perfect; however, in the view of VIFEMS, this measure comes very close. It thoughtfully addresses long-standing risks and hazards that impact not only first responders but also the residents of this Territory who too often experience utility service disruptions as a result of overgrown vegetation in some cases.

We respectfully encourage the members of this Committee, and the full body of the Legislature, to support Bill No. 36-0074.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify.