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# Enforcement of toxic sunscreen ban still ineffective more than two years after taking effect in territory

By ANDREA MILAM St. John Correspondent  
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Daily News photo by ANDREA MILAM

Dept. of Licensing and Consumer Affairs Commissioner Richard Evangelista, second from right, speaks during Wednesday's meeting at Trunk Bay, St. John, among government officials and stakeholders regarding the implementation of the toxic sunscreen ban. Also pictured are USVI Hotel & Tourism Association President Lisa Hamilton, At-Large Senator Steven Payne, Island Green Living President Harith Wickrema, and Friends of Virgin Islands National Park Executive Director Tonia Lovejoy.

ST. JOHN — Nearly two and a half years after the toxic sunscreen ban took effect in the Virgin Islands, territory leaders and officials gathered Wednesday in the hopes of making the law more effective.

Despite a ban on the importation, sale and use of sunscreens with the three “toxic Os”—oxybenzone, octocrylene, and octinoxate—sunscreens with these ingredients continue to be used in the territory, often by visitors who have no idea about the legislation.

“People come here wanting to do the right thing and they feel awful when they learn they have a product they thought they could trust that turns out to be harmful,” said Virgin Islands National Park Superintendent Nigel Fields.



The comments came during a discussion Wednesday at Trunk Bay among V.I. government officials and other stakeholders relative to effective implementation of the ban.

Department of Licensing and Consumer Affairs Commissioner Richard Evangelista noted that his department's enforcement of the ban on sales of harmful sunscreens took a back seat to COVID-19 enforcement just five months after the 2019 legislation was enacted. He said DLCA will rely on reports from community members who take note of sunscreens with the banned ingredients on local retailers' shelves.

"We don't have the manpower," said Evangelista. "We will schedule enforcement because that's the only way we can get our jobs done. We have a lot of enforcement authority and we can't do everything every day. As COVID winds down, hopefully we can get refocused on our mission."

DLCA is forming a nonprofit consumer action group and is developing an app where residents can report offenses, he added.

Only two other U.S. jurisdictions currently have a ban in effect on sunscreens with harmful ingredients — Key West, Fla., and Hawaii. On flights to Hawaii, a video message discussing the sunscreen ban is broadcast. Currently, there is no comprehensive effort or cohesive message to educate Virgin Islands visitors about the sunscreen legislation. Island Green Living Executive Director Kelly McKinney suggested that messaging about the three toxic Os should be shared with visitors before they board their flight to the Virgin Islands, when they've already purchased the sunscreen they intend to use.

Kitty Edwards, Department of Planning and Natural Resources' Coastal Zone Management education and outreach coordinator, who was a key testifier in support of the sunscreen legislation in 2019, suggested that a campaign targeting visitors should focus on what's important to them.



“The chemicals in these sunscreens are very harmful to human health, and that’s what is missing from this discussion,” said Edwards. “Corals are extremely important but you have to take a step back and see each individual’s reasoning. From a marketing standpoint, people care more about their kids than they care about the coral and I hope some of that can be incorporated.”

USVI Hotel & Tourism Association President Lisa Hamilton reported that her organization recently partnered with Customs & Border Protection and the Tourism Department in response to long lines at King Airport to generate a QR code educating visitors about ways they can speed up their airport departure process.

“We realized quickly there was other information that could go out to visitors including the Department of Tourism’s travel portal and certainly the sunscreen ban,” said Hamilton. “We’re in the beta phase right now and finding more info that will be helpful. We’ll give it to all the hotels and Airbnbs who want it, and the Department of Tourism is committed to contacting the airlines and asking them to utilize it. We have the mechanism.”

Attendees at the gathering agreed that messaging should be simple and consistent across all platforms. Adrian Davis, managing director of CinnOpCo which has the National Park Service concession for Trunk Bay and Cinnamon Bay, said he fears what the Virgin



Islands could look like in a decade if the health of coral reefs is not addressed today.

Scientists in attendance echoed Davis's sense of urgency.

"Climate change and global warming are coming down as a hammer on these reefs," said Dr. Marilyn Brandt, University of the Virgin Islands Research Associate Professor of Marine and Environmental Science. "If the reefs are in bad conditions because of things like sunscreens, they'll be less resilient to larger factors that we know will affect them very soon."

Frank Cummings, Caribbean Oceanographic Restoration and Education Foundation education and outreach director, spoke of the devastation he's seen during recent dives.

"In the last two years, there's been more devastation on the coral reefs than in the last 20," said Cummings. "We have a forest fire burning out there, and anything we can do to put that fire out, we need to do it now."



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