


Lawmakers advance sunscreen ban

 AJRao / By A.J. RAO Daily News Staff

 06.14.19

ST. THOMAS — Members of the Rules and Judiciary Committee unanimously advanced a bill Thursday to ban the sale and importation of sunscreen products containing ingredients harmful to marine life.

The measure — Bill 33-0043 — would make it illegal to sell, offer for sale or distribute sunscreen products with oxybenzone and octinoxate after Sept. 30, 2020; or import such products after Dec. 31, 2019; or use or possess the products by Jan. 1, 2021.

If passed and signed by the governor, the measure would make the territory the first jurisdiction in the country to implement such a sunscreen ban.

Both oxybenzone and octinoxate, according to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, have been linked to severe coral damage and bleaching.

“The Caribbean has already lost 80% of its coral reefs due to pollution and a variety of other issues,” said Harith Wickrema, president of Island Green Living Association, who spearheaded the bill.

Oxybenzone and octinoxate only add to this destruction, he said.

Other marine life, including endangered species like sea turtles, are also at risk from oxybenzone and octinoxate. The ingredients are also known carcinogens and can also impact humans.

In a statement sent to The Daily News on Thursday, Wickrema stated that Island Green Living Association is not advocating that people stop wearing sunscreen or limit their use of sunscreens, just that they use reef-safe mineral sunscreen containing titanium dioxide and zinc oxide.

Voting in favor of the bill were Senators Alicia Barnes, Novelle Francis Jr., Kenneth Gittens, Myron Jackson, Javan James Sr., Steven Payne Sr. and Janelle Sarauw.

Other bills

Lawmakers also unanimously passed Bill 33-0027, which would give the Education Department greater flexibility in setting the school calendar upon declaration of a state of emergency.

“This bill only becomes effective during a state of emergency, so it doesn’t in any way change the 180 days that is set forth by the Department of Education in cooperation with the [teacher unions],” said Sen. Kurt Vialet, who sponsored the bill.

The bill would require the Education Department to submit to the Legislature a disaster response plan by July 30 of this year and March 30 of every subsequent year.

The plan would include: how to use staff when there is no student contact; an outline of the minimum number of allowable instructional hours; a plan for the immediate assessment of facilities after a storm; and a plan to salvage equipment and supplies.

Senators also passed 33-0009, which provides a definition of a “Virgin Islands veteran,” as someone who entered the military while living in the territory, or who was a resident of the Virgin Islands but entered the military in another jurisdiction while temporarily residing in that jurisdiction.

The bill attempts to codify the definition of a Virgin Islands veteran in relation to the annual sale of taxi medallions exclusively to local veterans.

“This bill ensures that taxi medallions are reserved for veterans who are of the soil and part of the community,” said Sen. Marvin Blyden, co-sponsor of the bill.