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Senators to discuss bill to ban sale of toxic sunscreen products

By A.J. RAO Daily News Staff May 13, 2019



V.I. lawmakers are scheduled to discuss a bill this month that aims to ban the retail sale of sunscreen and personal care products containing oxybenzone and octinoxate, both of which are widely considered harmful to marine life.

Sponsored by Senators Marvin Blyden and Janelle Sarauw, and co-sponsored by Sen. Javan James, the bill aims to prevent the degradation of coral reef and other marine life — including endangered species like sea turtles — that has been linked to oxybenzone and octinoxate exposure.

“Elevated levels of oxybenzone and octinoxate have been detected at 10 popular swimming beaches and critical coral reef areas throughout the territory, including Trunk Bay, Hawksnest Bay and Buck Island,” the bill reads.

“The Legislature further finds that environmental contamination of oxybenzone and octinoxate persists in the Virgin Islands’ coastal waters, as the contamination is constantly refreshed and renewed daily by swimmers and beachgoers,” the bill continues.

“Just three drops of oxybenzone in an Olympic-sized swimming pool is enough to damage coral larvae,” says Nathan Donley, senior scientist for the Center for Biological Diversity.

According to The Washington Post, the center recently petitioned the U.S. Food and Drug Administration to ban the same ingredients on a national level.

The bill in the V.I. Legislature aims to restrict the sale and distribution of products containing these ingredients to a licensed pharmacy or a drug store via a prescription by Jan. 1, 2021.

Moreover, the V.I. Department of Licensing and Consumer Affairs will fine first-time offenders \$1,000. Subsequent offenders will be charged \$2,000, according to the bill.

The bill is scheduled to be discussed on May 20 during a Senate hearing of the Government Operations, Consumer and Veterans Affairs Committee on St. Thomas.

Harith Wickrema, president of Island Green Living, is an invited testifier. Recently, he submitted a statement to The Daily News pushing for a ban of oxybenzone and octinoxate.

“We have already lost 80 percent of the coral reefs in the Caribbean due to pollution and a variety of other issues,” Wickrema said.

“Island Green Living has advocated for a Virgin Islands ban of sunscreens with dangerous chemicals such as oxybenzone for the past two years. Given our tourism-driven economy, it is especially important that we protect our coral system and marine life — the very things that bring visitors to our beautiful islands and fuel our economy,” he added.

In Hawaii, the state Legislature enacted a law to ban the sale of sunscreens that contain oxybenzone and octinoxate last year, aiming to protect the state’s reefs. The ban in Hawaii, and a similar ban in Key West, Fla., will take effect in 2021.

A recent study of Kahaluu Bay, a popular spot with surfers, found levels of the sunscreen chemicals at 262 times greater than levels considered high-risk by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, according to the Kahaluu Bay Education Center, West Hawaii Today reported.

The concentration was likely high because it was taken at a spot where people enter the water and on days with heavy beach traffic, said Craig Downs, executive director of Haereticus Environmental Laboratory.

Unlike with climate change, the state can control the chemicals, said Cindi Punihaole, director of the Kahaluu Bay Education Center.

If V.I. lawmakers advance the bill on May 20, it will move to the Rules and Judiciary Committee, where further deliberation will determine whether it moves to a full body vote at a later date.

— *With wire reports*

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