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Lawmakers advance bill to ban sale of toxic sunscreen products

By A.J. RAO Daily News Staff 10 hrs ago

ST. THOMAS — V.I. lawmakers unanimously advanced a bill Monday to ban the sale of sunscreen products containing oxybenzone and octinoxate, both of which have proven harmful, even deadly, to coral reefs and other marine life.

Bill 33-0043 co-sponsor Sen. Janelle Sarauw said the vote was a “great win” for the environment, a small step that will have “huge impacts” in protecting coral reefs for future generations.

“To protect our environment is a multifaceted approach,” she said. “We began with straws and then plastic bags and now we’re talking about oxybenzone and octinoxate.”

Indeed, according to Harith Wickrema, president of Island Green Living Association, the Caribbean has already lost 80% of its coral reefs due to pollution and a variety of other issues.

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

“According to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, there is scientific evidence indicating that oxybenzone and octinoxate are deadly to coral and threaten overall reef health,” said Wickrema, during a Senate hearing of the Government Operations, Consumer and Veterans Affairs Committee.

“They cause coral bleaching, harm and eventually kill coral larvae by damaging DNA, and act as endocrine disruptors.”

Moreover, while other marine life, including endangered species like sea turtles, are also at risk from oxybenzone and octinoxate, the two known carcinogens can also impact humans.

“Oxybenzone and octinoxate accumulate in a person’s bloodstream after just one day of use at potentially unsafe levels,” Wickrema said. “It is absorbed through the skin and into the bloodstream.”

This can lead to hormonal disruptions, complications with pregnancies and allergic reactions, according to Wickrema.

Lawmakers were in support of the bill and advanced it to the Rules and Judiciary Committee.

Voting in favor of the bill were Senators Oakland Benta; Dwayne DeGraff; Novelle Francis Jr.; Steven Payne Sr.; and Athneil Thomas. The bill’s co-sponsor, Sarauw, is not a member of the committee so she did not vote.

The bill makes 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 in the territory by Jan. 1, 2021.

Lawmakers agreed that additional chemicals that may be harmful can possibly be added to the list.

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