

St. John

US VIRGIN ISLANDS

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## Senate Panel Votes to Ban Sunscreens with Toxic Chemicals

By Bethaney Lee - May 21, 2019

A Senate committee voted Monday to forward a bill banning two chemicals found in many sunscreens after a panel of witnesses, including chemists and divers, testified that the compounds contribute to the deterioration of coral reefs and have been linked to harmful side effects in humans.

The Senate Committee on Government Operations, Consumers and Affairs voted unanimously to pass bill [33-0043](#) to the Rules and Judiciary Committee, which will decide whether to send it on to the full Senate for a vote. If approved and signed into law, it would ban the sale of products containing oxybenzone or octinoxate in the territory.

"If the coral reef isn't the primary focus, then human health absolutely should be," said cosmetic chemist Autumn Blum. "The FDA just recently announced that only titanium and zinc oxide are generally recognized as safe. These other ingredients are known endocrine disruptors, which means they affect our hormonal development. Unborn children are being affected by this."

*Cosmetic chemist Autumn Blum testifies Monday before the Senate Committee on Government Operations, Consumers and Affairs, describing the toxic chemicals found in most sunscreens. (Photo by Barry Leerdam, USVI Legislature)*

Blum was an impromptu speaker, called up to deliver testimony due to her extensive knowledge on the topic.

Harith Wickrema, president of the Island Green Living Association, said there are 260 sunscreens on the market that do not contain the two compounds, but the ingredients are in more than two-thirds of all sunscreens on the market today.

Wickrema said exposure to the two chemicals have been proven to trigger puberty early in females and lower sperm counts in males.

The conservation of the V.I. coral reefs were presented just as ardently by the testifiers and Sen. Janelle Sarauw, who was one of the two senators to propose the bill.

Sarauw said 80 percent of V.I. reefs have been lost and "we cannot afford to ignore our coral reefs."

The testifiers each noted the chemicals are only one stressor that have caused the depletion of much of the reef, but said toxic sunscreen burn was something the Legislature could do something about.

According to Blum the two chemicals were biodegradable to a certain degree, and the life span in which the chemicals could cause harm to coral species was 72 days.

Kristina Edwards, education and outreach coordinator for the Coastal Management Division of the Department of Planning and Natural Resources, said the health of the V.I. reefs continue to decline since the 2005 mass bleaching event, which caused a 50 percent decline in coral cover in waters less than 85 feet in depth.

"USVI reefs are suffering the effects of overexploitation of reef resources and terrestrial sediment runoff is increasing mortality of threatened and ecologically crucial corals," Edwards said.

Edwards said the two chemicals were first recognized to induce coral bleaching in 2008.

The panel of testifiers hesitated to give a timeframe for the health of the V.I. reef or predict what would happen if the V.I. were to band the purchase of sunscreens that contained the two toxic chemicals. Edwards said only that some coral species could recover at a quicker rate while other corals species would require hundreds of years to return to optimal health.

"Sunscreen pollution is a symptom of unsustainable tourism, this is one factor along with Styrofoam, plastic bags and plastic straws. This is a very easy measure. You can take it out of the environment and give them (coral) a chance to fight and heal themselves," Blum said.

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