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V.I. leads the way for rest of U.S. as toxic sunscreen ban takes effect

Daily News Staff
Mar 31, 2020



Harith
Wickrema



Janelle
Sarauw



As of Monday, the Virgin Islands' toxic sunscreen ban went into effect, making the territory the first in the nation to implement a ban of sunscreen chemicals that are known to destroy coral and cause health risks for people.

The ban, which bars sunscreens with the “Toxic 3 O’s” — octinoxate, oxybenzone and octocrylene — ensures safer mineral sunscreens with zinc oxide and titanium dioxide become the default choice. Indeed, numerous studies show that the banned chemicals damage coral reefs, marine life and human health.

“These chemicals are at 40 times acceptable levels in some of our territorial waters — this simply cannot be,” said Sen. Janelle Sarauw, a sponsor of the bill that imposed the ban, in a statement.

“This ban protects the environment, our health and our livelihood. But equally important to laws is building awareness of the dangers of these chemicals versus safer alternatives such as mineral sunscreens. Everyone must do their part,” she said.

Harith Wickrema, president of the nonprofit Island Green Living Association, which helped spearhead the ban, said ridding the territory of toxic sunscreens will ensure tourism is sustainable.

“Tourism is our territory’s lifeblood and it will return in time,” he said in the statement. “When it does, the age-old dilemma endures — how do we continue to attract visitors with our natural beauty both on land and below the sea if those very visitors cause damage to these natural riches?”

According to Wickrema, once visitors are again welcomed to the territory, an education system is being planned that will notify them via their hotels, villas and airlines about the ban. Signage in ports and at the airport will also be in place, with information about switching out toxic sunscreens for products that meet the new mandate.

Lisa Hamilton, president of the V.I. Hotel and Tourism Association, said it is imperative that coral and marine life are protected.

“We are working with our membership to ensure visitors to our islands have access to safe sunscreens and are informed of the dangers posed by oxybenzone, octocrylene and octinoxate,” she said in the statement.

Wickrema commended Gov. Albert Bryan Jr. and the Legislature for their dedication to the environment and human health.

“In particular, Sen. Janelle Sarauw’s tenacity and commitment made this happen [Monday] versus later,” he said. “It is our hope that additional locales in the U.S. and other island nations will follow the territory’s lead — we all share the oceans.”

According to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, there is scientific evidence indicating the “Toxic 3 O’s” are deadly to coral and threaten overall reef health. The chemicals also cause human cell damage linked to cancer, disrupt hormones and have been found in breast milk, blood and urine.

Coral can rejuvenate, however, once these chemicals are out of the water, according to Island Green Living.

Paul Jobsis, director of the Center for Marine and Environmental Studies at the University of the Virgin Islands, was scheduled to do a test Monday of the water at Trunk Bay, which would then be compared with future tests to see the environmental impact of the ban.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the testing has been postponed.