THE St. John Source
US VIRGIN ISLANDS

June 27, 2017Op-Ed: Preparing for Droughts Should be a Priority in the V.I.

S **stjohnsource.com**/2020/03/12/op-ed-preparing-for-droughts-should-be-a-priority-in-the-v-i

March 12, 2020

Brown hills under drought conditions in 2019. (Source file photo)

Late last year, the Virgin Islands were in the midst of a drought. Cisterns and ponds dried up, water trucks were zipping through at all times of day, crops and livestock were stressed out. Luckily, rains arrived and even though St. Croix is still experiencing a moderate drought, St. Thomas and St. John are out of the danger zone. But for a moment before Christmas we were all scrambling – buying water, reducing water usage and farmers asking for emergency help.

Every time a drought occurs, we are surprised. They tend to creep up on us and can occur during different periods of the year, like last November. However, droughts are not a new thing. Looking back at historical records the most famous drought in the territory occurred on St. John in 1733, when starved and exhausted slaves revolted. In the mid-1800s, in 1964-67, 1974, 1983, 1995-96 and more recently in 2015 droughts on the islands were severe enough to place them in the history books.

So we should not be surprised. And it is not good for us to be surprised, or to struggle to make do. In addition to making us anxious, droughts can degrade air quality and make hot days feel hotter, causing people with health issues to suffer. Droughts can also increase the risk of bushfires, which has happened in the past, especially on St. Croix.

Finally, access to water is expensive. A water truck delivery can cost more than $100 per 1,000 gallons. Buying water for drinking can set us back anywhere between $600 to more than $1,000 per 1,000 gallons. And for farmers, the situation is even more complicated as they – and often the government – have to care for crops and livestock. In other words, droughts can be an economic burden in the V.I.!

Unfortunately, the future of the V.I. will be dry: According to the latest National Climate Assessment, we – and the Caribbean in general – are likely to experience drier wet seasons and drier dry seasons. What this means is that it's time for us to start thinking hard about water management in the territory and put in place measures that will help when dry times fall upon us.

More than 300 years ago, Virgin Islanders were catching water from their roofs into cisterns. In the early to mid-1900s public water catchment, cisterns, ponds and impoundments were everywhere, providing water to the public, farmers and businesses. Public water management was a priority for us. Now that we know what's coming, and how bad droughts can be in the V.I., it is a good time to put in place effective drought mitigation strategies. For example, we know that having a cistern and being connected to WAPA almost eliminates the risk of drying up your cistern or using your savings buying water. Other strategies include planting drought resistant or native plants; investing in dishwashers, dual flush toilets or other water conservation technologies. We also know that we can limit the impacts of drought on farmers, and on the government budget, by refurbishing public cisterns or abandoned impoundments, by strategically pruning trees, planting soil cover grasses or stockpiling hay.

Those are some ideas. You probably have more. We want to hear them and discuss them all. The University of the Virgin Islands and VITEMA are partnering to update the territory's Hazard Mitigation Plan. Through this effort, we are designing risk reduction strategies so disasters like droughts, or hurricanes, or earthquakes do not cripple us. Your input to this effort is critical and we encourage you to participate in our public events.

We'll be discussing drought impacts and reduction strategies. Please join us for these upcoming events.

For more information, please visit our website usvihazardmitigationplan.com, or contact kim.waddell@uvi.edu.

Dr. Greg Guannel, Ph.D.
Director, Caribbean Green Technology Center