

June 27, 2017 Open Forum: Researchers Need Input for Updated Hazard Mitigation Plan

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The vulnerability of the U.S. Virgin Islands was fully realized in September 2017 when hurricanes Irma and Maria damaged thousands of buildings, dozens of critical facilities and severely impacted many of our natural resources. After the storms, and notwithstanding our collective dedication and round the clock efforts, it took many months for life in the territory to return to some degree of normalcy. Yet we still have much more to do as our government and community groups continue to actively work to restore, redevelop and revitalize the health, social, economic, natural and environmental fabric of our community.



Dr. Kim Waddell

Meanwhile, the territory is still vulnerable to the impacts of many other natural hazards. In recent months, we endured a drought, flooding and landslides from severe rainstorms, and an earthquake that fortunately did not trigger a tsunami. We are now in peak hurricane season just after experiencing Hurricane Dorian and Tropical Storm Karen. In addition, our climate future is uncertain. Sea levels are rising, average days and nights are getting warmer, droughts will become more prevalent and hurricanes and rainstorms are becoming more intense and unpredictable. Consequently, in order for our territory to continue to thrive in these uncertain times, we collectively have a growing responsibility to create and implement effective hazard mitigation strategies.

The need for the territory to successfully create and implement pre- and post-disaster mitigation strategies is urgent. Despite our increased vulnerability, there is a growing likelihood that the next time we are hit by a powerful disaster, we may not be supported at the same level of disaster response and recovery funding that we see today. Indeed, FEMA and other federal agencies are already stretched thin – from wildfires in the west, to river

flooding and tornadoes in the south and midwest, hurricanes and rainstorms in the Atlantic and Pacific, to heat waves that impact most of the continental U.S. – and the trend will not abate. However, mitigation strategies, if implemented effectively and sustained over time, will lessen the impacts of future disasters, and ensure that we — at the family, community and territorial levels – are able to deliver the most important services required for us to function and continue to prosper after such events. Effective mitigation strategies are concrete goals where progress can be measured and sustained that reduce the impacts of hazards, and increase community resilience.

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The Virgin Islands Territorial Emergency Management Agency (VITEMA) and the University of the Virgin Islands (UVI) have embarked on the update of the territory's Hazard Mitigation Plan (HMP) this past July. States and territories are federally required to update their HMPs every five years to be eligible for pre- and post-disaster grants and assistance. Work has already begun on the next update. However, in addition to proposing mitigation strategies for known hazards, the next HMP will also integrate principles of climate adaptation, sustainability and resilience (community, infrastructure and ecological resilience). Furthermore, because we recognize that a vibrant and strong culture contributes to the health and welfare of our community in the best of times, the plan will go beyond the protection of hard assets and infrastructure. We will investigate how to protect intangible cultural identity and heritage that identifies us as Virgin Islanders, offer comfort and connection, help us heal, move forward and become more resilient. The recognition and inclusion of these principles expand the planning effort and justifies the renaming of the HMP to the “Hazard Mitigation and Resilience Plan for the Virgin Islands” (HMRP).

The HMRP effort is an important opportunity and potential turning point for the territory. We — UVI researchers and students, V.I. Government agencies and staff, the business community, non-government organizations, and most importantly, the citizens representing our diverse communities and islands — have a unique chance to work together in building this transformative plan. Our goal is to create an HMRP that will include transparency of processes, informative assessments of government and community strengths and needs, and educational opportunities to strengthen our communities and workforce for future disasters. However, despite these intentions and our capabilities to generate a useful and implementable HMRP, we will not be successful unless we have the engagement and support of the people of the Virgin Islands.

We therefore look forward to engaging the public in a variety of ways. UVI and VITEMA will be reaching out to community leaders, business leaders, faith-based leaders, other stakeholders and the general public to participate in developing the USVI HMRP. We will be asking and soliciting input and feedback during various public forums that we will organize.

These meetings will be coming soon to all three major islands to ensure that we hear from all the people who want to be part of the solutions that strengthen the resilience of the USVI.

Look out for more details soon. We are excited to begin working with you to make the VI stronger!

Dr. Kim Waddell is the director of the Virgin Islands Established Program to Stimulate Competitive Research.