

UVI and VITEMA Work to Update Hazard Mitigation Plan

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The University of the Virgin Islands and the V.I. Territorial Emergency Management Agency are continuing their annual effort to update the territory's "Hazard Mitigation Plan," a requirement for FEMA emergency assistance. A webinar held on Wednesday explored the readiness of the territory for hurricanes and coastal flooding.

Assistant director of VITEMA Barbara Petersen served as the event's moderator. Other panelists included researchers from the University of the Virgin Islands Kim Waddell and Greg Guannel. Petersen compared VITEMA's disaster mitigation plan from 2017 to its current one. She explained the addition of THIRA or "The National Threat and Hazard Identification and Risk

Assessment," which assesses the impacts of the most catastrophic threats and hazards to the territory and establishes capability targets to manage them. Regarding THIRA, Petersen said, "this is not limited to the cleaning of roads and drainage, but it also includes infrastructures, airports, seaports and hospitals to name a few."

Waddell, who is the director of the Virgin Islands Established Program to Stimulate Competitive Research, provided an update regarding the territory's Hazard Mitigation and Resilience Plan. The plan is updated every five years and ensures the territory is eligible for federal funds both before and after disasters strike. Waddell said the plan is current as of July 2019. The last plan helped the territory receive vital assistance before Hurricane Irma making landfall in 2017.



Wind damaged the Puma Gas Station in Smith Bay, St. Thomas after Hurricane Irma in 2017. (Source Photo by Diana Dias)

Waddell said climate change is a factor in the increase in hazardous events. “The hazards that we are vulnerable to because of this climate change include earthquakes, tsunamis, landslides, stronger more intense storms, longer droughts, sea levels rising and higher temperatures,” Waddell said. “These natural hazards can be devastating to our economy and our communities.”

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Guannel, a coastal engineer and co-lead for the Virgin Islands' next Hazard Mitigation and Resilience Plan update, also touched on continued research. "Hurricanes are getting stronger; 75 percent of all hurricanes impact all three islands, but because of our resilience and generosity we have been able to rise to the occasion," Guannel said.

Wednesday's virtual discussion touched on researchers' findings regarding home construction in the territory. "The more elevated the home, the higher the wind speed," Guannel said. He also discussed the impact of storm surge on infrastructure and roads that are close to shorelines. "When the sea level rises it makes the drainage more difficult and causes coastal damage to be worse and the beaches to erode faster," Guannel said.

According to Waddell, "Since 1985 the number of roads in the Virgin Islands have increased by 68 percent and the amount of critical facilities have increased by 93 percent ... More than 25 percent of these buildings are in flood and tsunami zones. More than 45 percent of government, public safety and health buildings are in flood zones. More than 40 percent are in extremely high wind zones."

Some of the items that are continuing to be reviewed are how infrastructure is being designed to handle larger storms, how to maintain infrastructure and land use and the development of patterns. Currently, the territory does not have a land and water use plan.

According to Waddell, UVI plans to continue its involvement in the mitigation plan. “More internships and more research and exposure are in the works,” he said.

During the question and answer segment, a question was raised about the status of the VITEMA siren system. The territory’s tsunami warning sirens were destroyed by the 2017 hurricanes and are set to be reinstalled by September of this year. Petersen said, “The sirens are currently being reinstalled throughout the territory.”