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Committee on Public Safety,
Homeland Security and
Justice

TESTIMONY

ON H.R. 59 TO CONVEY CERTAIN SUBMERGED LAND TO THE GOVERNMENT OF THE VIRGIN ISLANDS AND FOR OTHER PURPOSES

July 9, 2007

Good morning honorable members of the Committee on Natural Resources of the U.S. House of Representatives.

I am Alvin L. Williams, Jr., an elected member of the 27th Legislature of the Virgin Islands, now serving as Chairman of the Committee on Planning and Environmental Protection. I am also the official Liaison to the United States Congress.

I am privileged to appear before your august Committee today in support of H.R. 59 - to convey certain submerged lands to the Government of the Virgin Islands and for other purposes.

The proposal before you is needed because it represents long overdue action the federal government needed to take to equalize the area of federal waters surrounding the United States Virgin Islands to that of Puerto Rico. There is no reason that in this important stage of our political development That we in this American territory should be treated as step children not entitled to equal treatment as our next door neighbor and fellow American citizens in Puerto Rico.

Is it fair for Puerto Rico to have nine miles of territorial waters and three miles of federal waters, while we in the United States Virgin Islands have three miles of territorial waters and nine miles of federal waters?

This inequity has created problems in jurisdiction for the Caribbean Fisheries Management Council which is legally charged with managing federal waters in the Caribbean. As a result of existing policy there has been unfair and uneven application of marine policy affecting the well-being and livelihood of Virgin Islands fishermen.

For too many years, Virgin Islands fishermen have been punished by federal policy which has placed them in a disadvantageous position. I, as well as a majority of the members of our First Branch, am hoping that H.R. 59 will finally address this perceived imbalance in federal management policies.

More.../

Elected officials in the Virgin Islands are respectfully requesting that you support a provision of H.R. 59 that clarifies that the waters between St. Croix and St. Thomas and St. John be declared officially as territorial waters.

Over eight years ago, at the end of the Clinton Administration, two new National Monuments were designated in this United States territory. During the deliberations on these designations, there was an official announcement that title to all of the submerged land was not transferred to the Government of the Virgin Islands in 1974 as we believed. This represented a setback in our journey of more autonomy and self determination.

Ladies and gentlemen of this august and distinguished Committee, the people of the Virgin Islands are in the process of developing and drafting a constitution which will represent the unique position that we hold as proud citizens of the United States. We are embarking on a new venture of nation building when we will fashion a document that will defend our rights to equal treatment under the Constitution of the United States.

H. R. 59 represents a step in a new direction which will fulfill the hopes of Virgin Islanders for equal and fair treatment under the law.

Thank you for giving me this opportunity to testify in support of H.R. 59. God bless you all.