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Ocean Policy Concerns in the U.S. Virgin Islands

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I wish to thank the Commission for the opportunity to present a summary of concerns and issues regarding ocean policy that are of importance to the U.S. Virgin Islands. It is not often that we are afforded this type of space in national discussions. The information for this presentation is based on reports and a recent meeting of a number of stakeholders in the USVI that are normally involved in resource management that is linked to ocean policy. The territory is home to a small group of scientists and professionals who work with federal and international agencies on these matters on a routine basis. The limited numbers in our human resource pool forces us to be involved in issues from a multidisciplinary and cross-sector perspective and to value the benefits of effective partnerships and collaboration.

The development and implementation of ocean policy in the US Virgin Islands are significantly influenced by and often dependent on the physical (size and topography), ecological, social, economic and political characteristics of the territory. The islands of the USVI, which are small enough to be considered coastal areas from the ridges to the reefs, have terrestrial and marine ecosystems of high natural and economic value, including the extensive coral reef system on St. Croix and the diverse marine resources of the VI National Park on St. John and St. Croix.. The significant degradation or losses of marine and coastal resources in the USVI are often irreversible and result in negative impacts on economically important tourism related activities, local fisheries, public health and the quality of life in general. The government and the people of the VI are generally aware of the high value of the marine resources in the territory. Nevertheless, there are still many challenges to the achievement of effective and wise use of these natural resources.

The main ocean policy issues and concerns for the USVI are complex and far reaching in their potential effects on the future development of the Virgin Islands as a sustainable community. The concerns emanate from the societal desire for a safe and healthy environment that can support economic activity and life for generations into the future, regardless of political status or level of development.

Issues and concerns:

- ❖ The challenges of undertaking development on small islands with steep slopes, fairly dense populations and fragile inshore coastal systems can be seen in the serious impacts of land-based nonpoint sources of pollution on reefs and other coastal ecosystems. The potential negative impacts on fisheries, public health and coastal resources based tourism continue to grow, despite the involvement of a number of government and nongovernmental organization (ngo) groups in seeking solutions. Public education and communication programs and changes in development laws and procedures are major strategies to decrease this negative environmental input that is pervasive and far-reaching in its effects on the economy and quality of life in the USVI.
- ❖ Rapid population growth and development under constraints of limited land mass and public funding have also resulted in major waste management challenges. Solid and liquid waste disposal are contributors to environmental degradation and public health concerns involving both land and ocean systems in the USVI. Again, the efforts thus far have involved governments and ngos attacking the problem from different levels. This is a major ocean quality problem for the Caribbean in general (identified by the UNEP Caribbean Environment Program), and activities underway to address it in the region include the US as a partner, but the role and benefits for the USVI in this international effort are not clear.
- ❖ The recognition of the stress on coral reef ecosystems from fishing pressure and pollution have led to proposals for marine reserves and other restrictions on fishing, creating social issues among different stakeholders and the need to effectively address conservation and resource use as a community. Expansion of the boundaries of the VI National Park, identification of new no-take fishing zones, implementation of the Buck Island National Monument, and completion and implementation of the proposed marine park management plan are all part of the efforts in the territory to protect and enhance coral reef ecosystems. The challenge is to realize the appropriate level of integration of these conservation efforts into the development activities and economic decision-making that will also occur.
- ❖ The threats of natural hazards like hurricanes and earthquakes have created concerns about the extent to which current policy addresses mitigation and recovery issues for manmade and natural systems that are important to the sustainability of the USVI as a society.
- ❖ The need to have the data necessary to make critical decisions regarding development or natural disaster issues has become a concern of the territory's agencies and policy makers. It is not always clear if the data exist or how to access the information needed. There have been some attempts to link local

agencies to federal partners electronically, and in some cases access to local agencies is through the federal system via the Internet. However, the local government does not have an integrated information management system and communication within the territory to develop and implement policy is slower and often less supported by the databases currently available.

All of the issues listed above point to the need for the territory to *build its capacity* to address its policy development and implementation challenges over the long-term. Many of the concerns and issues that are listed will continue to grow and have negative impacts if the local capacity to resolve the issue is not developed appropriately. This requires input and commitment from the local and federal levels.

The following recommendations are made to the Commission:

Require and provide opportunities for increased input from the territories in the development of policy and the strategies devised to implement them.

- Create local working group(s) consisting of federal and local government officials with jurisdiction over coastal/ocean policy. This would allow for better rationalization (to local conditions) of the policies produced and implemented. This may also assist to reduce the challenges faced by the VI National Park in the territory and allow it to become a true biosphere reserve.
- Recognize the need for appropriate communication strategies for involving local stakeholders.
- Include and support active USVI representation on US delegations that would involve development of international or national environmental policy impacting the Caribbean and small islands (e.g., IOCaribe, UNEP-Caribbean Environment Program)

Rationalize the coordination of federal agencies involved in the development and implementation of policy

- Communicate to the USVI how the coordination (among various federal agencies and with the local counterparts) will work and how this will make the implementation of the policy more effective.
- Consider providing a liaison for each policy under consideration. The liaison will communicate (to the local government agencies) the outputs and needs of other agencies that will be involved at the federal level.

Recognize the need to include capacity building for the territory in the implementation phase of all policies.

- Identify local expertise (e.g., university scientists and professionals) that can assist with implementation and include them in some of the policy orientation sessions early in the process of development
- Ensure that funding is made available to implement policies that were not previously addressed by the territory.

- Require effective communication with and education of the VI public in the implementation phase
- Provide assistance to develop a conservation strategy for the USVI that would help to bring a number of the activities currently underway (e.g., development of the marine park management plan) into a coherent framework.

Recognize that federal and local government agencies need orientation and strategies to enable them to work in multi-sector or cross-sector teams during policy development.

- Require federal agencies and local government agencies to demonstrate how their action plans and strategies will be implemented working in interdisciplinary and cross-sector teams.