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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

FISH & WILDLIFE WARNS PUBLIC OF EXPECTED “HIGH” SARGASSUM IN 2026

Commissioner Jean-Pierre L. Oriol of the Department of Planning and Natural Resources (DPNR), on behalf of the Division of Fish and Wildlife (DFW), is advising the public that Virgin Islands shorelines are likely to experience significantly elevated levels of sargassum in 2026. This forecast is based on new findings from the University of South Florida College of Marine Science’s Optical Oceanography Lab. These assessments are developed in collaboration with DPNR-DFW, the University of South Florida, and regional partners through support from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration’s Monitoring and Event Response for Harmful Algal Blooms Research Program:

<https://coastalscience.noaa.gov/project/developing-an-operational-sargassum-hab-monitoring-and-forecasting-system-for-the-southeastern-u-s-and-u-s-caribbean/>.

A bulletin released on January 5, 2026, reported that satellite observations from December 2025 revealed sharp increases in sargassum throughout the Eastern Caribbean Sea and the western Atlantic compared to the previous month. Two substantial sargassum masses have formed—one in each region. According to the lab’s analysis, accelerated local growth has pushed sargassum abundance across the Atlantic to more than 75 percent above historical averages.

“Because of the rapid growth from November to December and because of the high Sargassum amount in most regions, 2026 is likely another major Sargassum year,” the oceanography lab notes. They further warn that continued growth in the Caribbean is likely, increasing the chances of beaching events across the Mexican Caribbean coast and several Lesser Antilles islands. Some early beaching has already been observed—an unusual trend expected to continue in the coming months.

Sargassum is a type of brown, free-floating macroalgae that historically proliferated in the Sargasso Sea, where it supports a diverse array of marine life. However, since 2011, a new

bloom originating near the mouth of the Amazon River has resulted in recurrent, large-scale accumulations along Caribbean coastlines. Once washed ashore, decomposing sargassum releases hydrogen sulfide, producing a strong “rotten egg” odor and causing eye, nose, throat, and respiratory irritation, particularly for individuals with asthma. Avoiding beaches with large amounts of decaying sargassum is the best method of prevention.

While sargassum in the water is not harmful to swimmers, marine organisms such as jellyfish that inhabit the algae can cause skin irritation upon contact. It may also pose risks to motorized vessels, as large clumps can become tangled in propellers. If this occurs, boat operators are advised to place the motor in reverse to clear the obstruction.

Manual removal by hand or with rakes is permitted for small-scale nuisance sargassum that cannot be avoided. In more severe situations, beachfront businesses may apply for permits through DFW and the Division of Coastal Zone Management to use mechanical equipment for removal. Deployment of containment booms requires a permit from the Army Corps of Engineers. DFW also provides required training to ensure removal efforts follow ecological best practices and comply with Virgin Islands Code.

DPNR will continue issuing these monthly updates via press release.

For more information, visit **dpmr.vi.gov** or contact:

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