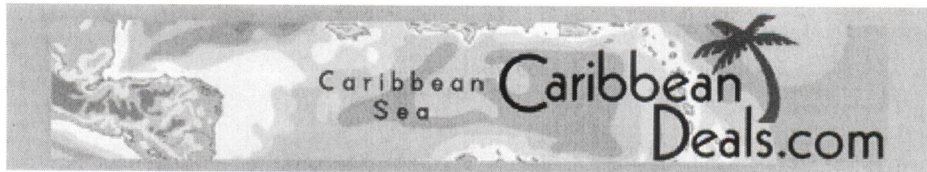




Friday, Mar. 24, 2017

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## MORE DRILLING MUD FOUND IN BUTLER BAY

by *Jamie Bate*

Four years after St. Croix's Butler Bay was fouled with drilling mud spilled during an AT&T fiberoptic cable project, more of the environmentally damaging material has been found on the sea floor.

The extent of the recently discovered bentonite drilling mud is unclear, as is whether further environmental damage has occurred, according to Dean Plaskett, commissioner of the Department of Planning and Natural Resources.

"We have discovered more drilling mud. We expect to find more," Plaskett told members of the Senate Committee on Planning and Environmental Protection Friday. "We'll be discovering mud for some time into the future."

In 1996, the federal and territorial governments charged that AT&T had released hundreds of thousands of gallons of bentonite mud in Butler Bay while drilling conduit for fiber optic cables. The drilling mud covered and killed conch and other aquatic organisms and smothered large areas of sea grass and coral.

The V.I. government attempted to fine AT&T \$23 million but settled the case a year ago for \$8 million. The federal government received \$1.8 of that sum in penalties. The bulk of the settlement, \$6 million, went to the territory in the form of permit fees for other AT&T cable projects and to reimburse the government for related monitoring and legal costs.

Because of a stipulation in the settlement agreement, no further penalties can be extracted by the territory for environmental damage done.

AT&T officials couldn't immediately be reached to comment on Plaskett's statements. The company undertook a cleanup of the area in 1997 under an order from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and must continue to monitor it under the settlement agreement.