

STATEMENT BY THE HONOURABLE KATHERINE EBANKS- WILKS

MINISTER FOR HEALTH, ENVIRONMENT AND SUSTAINABILITY LANDFILL OPERATIONS AND WASTE MANAGEMENT

30 April 2026

Mister Speaker,

I want to start by speaking directly to the people most affected by the recent fire at the George Town landfill – to those who woke up to smoke in the air, who kept their children home from school, who sat in traffic because roads were closed, who worried about what they were breathing. And who thought: why is this still happening?

I hear that question. This Government hears that question. And today I am going to answer it – not with reassurances, but with a plan that is already being executed.

I also want to recognise and thank the Cayman Islands Fire Service, the Department of Environmental Health, Hazard Management Cayman Islands, and every agency that responded to this incident. They managed a dangerous and complex situation with discipline, coordination, and sustained effort. This Government, this House, and the public owe them a genuine debt of gratitude.

They did their job. Now we have to do ours.

Mister Speaker,

I am not here to dress this up. The landfill is under pressure. And has been for years.

It's time to change course.

The NCFC government has a structured plan to tackle this long-standing issue across four fronts at the same time:

We are exiting what is behind us.

We are stabilizing what we have.

We are reducing what goes in.

And we are building what comes next.

We have money in the budget for immediate infrastructure and operational improvements, and funding to develop the long-term solution. I have allocated \$6 million this year and another \$2 million next year so we can implement our plan, and work is already underway.

First – Exiting ReGen

Mister Speaker,

We are bringing the ReGen negotiations to a close – and it is important the country understands why.

Not to dwell on the past – but to be clear about the decisions we are making now.

Based on a number of technical reports including a report by the OAG affirmed the view that the previous ReGen arrangement was considered as unaffordable, high risk and not delivering value for money. It would have committed this country to decades of financial obligation, leaving future generations in debt.

The decision to exit was taken because it was not in the best long-term interests of the country.

Mister Speaker, reaching the end of these negotiations allows us to accelerate waste diversion and the development of a long-term solution. These exit negotiations began in 2024, and we are fully committed to bringing them to

an agreeable close so we can focus our attention and resources on the long-term solution.

Second — Improving Landfill Operations

Mister Speaker,

Right now, we are strengthening management of the George Town landfill to make it safer and more stable.

Let me be specific about what that means in practice.

Expanding daily cover

We are placing approximately 4,000 cubic yards of cover material across the site — the equivalent of around 200 truckloads. This suppresses heat, limits oxygen exposure, reduces odour and pests, and directly lowers fire risk. Cover is a permanent feature of daily operations, not just a one-off response to the fire.

Equipment

We had identified the need for additional equipment when we agreed a budget of \$2.7 million to improve landfill operations. We know that consistent compaction is key as it reduces fire risk and extends the site's operational life. We are procuring a compactor for Cayman Brac, as well as a second compactor for the George Town landfill. When the fire broke out, the primary compactor was out of action pending delivery of a part in May. Going forward, we will have two compactors plus a back-up to ensure uninterrupted service.

We are also procuring two dump trucks, an additional bulldozer, a medical incinerator, a tire shredder, two additional fire wells for George Town, and one each for the Sister Islands.

Procurement is also underway to remove end-of-life vehicles, scrap metal and tires in all three islands.

Fire prevention plan

We have had a Landfill Fire Prevention and Response Plan in place since 2025. Fire prevention is not a reaction to this incident — it is embedded in daily operations through compaction, daily cover, load checking, fire breaks, and equipment maintenance. Clear emergency procedures are in place, including coordination with the Fire Service and accountability for all personnel on site. We are now reviewing that plan in light of the recent fire, because we have to determine what can be done better — and we will.

Air quality monitoring

As Minister for both Health and Environment, I understand that for residents near the landfill, the most pressing question is whether the air they breathe is safe. We are assessing what our current monitoring network tells us about air quality during and after the fire, evaluating what additional capacity is needed to give residents the continuous, location-specific data they deserve and I will report back to this house on that assessment.

Third — Reducing Landfill Waste & Increasing Landfill Capacity

Mister Speaker,

Waste diversion and landfill life extension are being advanced together along with legislation and policies. As I mentioned at the beginning, our exit negotiations are critical to informing how we move forward with the recycling workstream and the long-term solution.

The truth is simple. If we keep sending the same volume of waste to the same place, the current landfill will reach capacity by the end of 2030.

This is where change has to happen.

49% of the waste entering the landfill comes from commercial activity – and two thirds of that is recyclable. Diverting this waste is a high-impact priority.

That is why we are introducing mandatory commercial recycling.

We are investing in a new Material Recycling Facility to increase our sorting and processing capacity by 2029. I will share the final decisions on location, cost and operational specifications at the appropriate stage of the procurement process.

We are also expanding residential recycling depots and developing public education campaigns on responsible disposal of waste, including batteries, waste oil and hazardous materials that could pose a fire risk.

Single-use plastics

Mister Speaker,

We are also taking action at the source – moving forward with a ban on key single use plastics.

On Earth Day, students from Cayman Prep and High School handed Minister DaCosta and me a petition. I want to read two lines from it, because they deserve to be heard in this House.

"Single-use plastics are used briefly but last for years, harming marine life and polluting our islands."

"Every day we see pollution on our beaches... we are asking you to take stronger action."

Those young people are right. And they are watching to see whether their government answers the call with action, not words.

We have issued drafting instructions to ban the import of eight commonly used single-use plastic items under Customs and Border Control legislation.

This is a long-awaited step, building on work begun under the former Premier, the Honourable Wayne Panton. I am committed to working with Minister DaCosta to deliver it.

A new lined landfill

Mister Speaker, core to our plan is a new lined landfill.

Adjacent to the current tipping area is Government-owned land, referred to as Site 4. This is where we will construct a new, engineered landfill built to modern environmental standards – a long shot from what we have today. This is not a stopgap. This is a deliberate, well-considered infrastructure decision that extends the operational life of the landfill to 2036 – provided there are no major hurricanes – protects the surrounding environment, and provides the stable operational platform we need while the permanent solution is developed.

Fourth — Building the Permanent Solution

Mister Speaker,

We are developing a modern, integrated waste management solution for the Cayman Islands. I will be honest with this House about the timeline – because after 30 years of missed commitments, honesty about what is realistic is more important than promises that sound good and deliver nothing.

We are doing this properly, because the country deserves a solution that lasts.

The steering committee will be in place by summer. We expect to reach the Outline Business Case stage – where the preferred solution, its costs, land requirements, and environmental performance are defined – by the fall of 2027.

Applying lessons learned from ReGen and the Auditor General's report, we will not commit major public funds to a project before it is fully scoped and costs are defined. We are not refusing to fund a long-term solution, we are refusing to repeat the mistake of turning a well-intentioned project into a financial liability. The capital investment will come when we know exactly what we are investing in.

Conclusion – A commitment, not a reassurance

Mister Speaker,

This issue reaches beyond infrastructure.

It touches health.

It touches the environment.

It touches the future we are building for the next generation.

The difference is this time we have a clear path forward – a structured plan to improve landfill operations and reduce what we send to the landfill, while we build what we need for the future.

Today, I commit to you that the can will be kicked down the road no longer. Work is already underway, the funding is in place and the direction is clear. By the end of this year, we expect the ReGen exit to be concluded and the steering committee to produce the first strategic outline case for a modern waste management system for these islands.

Mister Speaker, this problem cannot be deferred. This Government will not defer it. I will not defer it.

Mister Speaker, I thank you.