



Opening Statement
Full Committee Hearing on Hurricane Recovery
Chairman Lisa Murkowski
November 14, 2017

Good morning and welcome, everyone. The Committee will come to order.

We are here this morning to review ongoing recovery efforts in Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands in the wake of Hurricanes Irma and Maria, as well as efforts to rebuild the electric grids on those islands in a smarter, more resilient manner.

We are over two months removed from when Hurricane Irma devastated St. Thomas and St. John on September 6. And it has been nearly 60 days since Hurricane Maria hit St. Croix and Puerto Rico.

A little over a week ago Senators Cassidy, Franken and I, along with Senators Carper and Harris and some of our House colleagues, visited both St. Thomas and Puerto Rico. I want to thank both Governors, Governor Roselló and Governor Mapp, for your hospitality. The time you gave us during that visit, it was incredibly important I think for all of us to see, to be on the ground, and to be hearing directly from you and those that you are working with. I know some of the other members of our committee have traveled to Puerto Rico previously, and I thank them for that as well.

What I think we certainly observed is that the destruction is still very evident. When you consider the totality of recovery work that still needs to be done, I think in a word it can be said that it is “overwhelming”—one of those “where do you even begin” moments. I think we certainly felt that in Puerto Rico, we felt that in USVI. I mentioned when we were there in Puerto Rico that I’d seen my share of natural disasters, but nothing like this. Nothing like the scale that you see when you see an entire island that has been devastated. As we had an opportunity to be up in the air and fly over some of the impacted areas in Puerto Rico, it seemed like we never left an area that had been not only damaged, but devastated. In front of the dais are some photos from our trip – over to my left here you can see a solar field that we flew over in Puerto Rico, you can see closer to the front panels that remained intact, and while the resolution isn’t that good, the panels in the back looked like somebody just smashed through them. In front of Senator Cantwell, here, are solar panels, a field we saw in Puerto Rico driving by, but again seeing the impact. Right below Senator Cortez Masto, there is a picture of some apartments that we drove by in Saint Thomas, where the buildings had been just blasted through from one side to the other, so a clean sweep through these apartment buildings. Below Senator Heinrich you can see some of the devastation again in Puerto Rico, the blue tarps are certainly coming to be a symbol of the devastation we see post hurricane – not just here in the Caribbean, but certainly as we’ve seen

the devastation from Harvey in Houston in and in Florida, but I think you can see just how these properties in a way, and in a manner, that is just devastating. Below Senator Franken is an area we toured where the land had been taken out by landslide. Not only did we see this particular scene, but another area where the access to some 200 roads had been cut off by horrible landslides, stranding homes on the other side. We had an opportunity to visit with a young woman whose home was on the other side, and she had not been able to visit her home since the hurricane had happened – a very, very touching story, one that I think all of us will remember for a long time. But I think we also recognize that while we were in Puerto Rico looking at the damage from the land-slides, and appreciating that particularly in the interior where you have such mountainous areas, this is still the rainy season. And with the number of trees that have been taken down, the slope stability during the rainy months is very uncertain. So the damages that we're seeing today may not be the damage we are dealing with days and weeks from now. Very, very, very sobering. And when you look at this and realize that these pictures were taken just last week, it is clear evidence that there is much, much, much to do.

But as daunting as the recovery effort is, it is matched by the spirit of those who live on the islands, and we saw that – we felt that. While we were over there in Puerto Rico, we were reminded there is a resiliency in the people. Members have been given a can of soda this morning, which was manufactured and bottled in Puerto Rico with the hashtag, Fuerza Puerto Rico, which is “Puerto Rico Strong”. So I thought that that was pretty cool, that even in the midst of this they were coming together, working to remind each of us of the resiliency of the people of Puerto Rico, the people of the U.S. Virgin Islands – that this is their home and to reinforce our commitment to our fellow Americans that we need to do what we can to help rebuild these islands.

Today's hearing will also look at ways to make the electric grids on the islands more resilient to future storms. I think we all agree that it makes no sense to spend hundreds of millions of dollars in Stafford Act funding to rebuild these grids to pre-storm conditions, as is the Stafford Act currently requires.

Puerto Rico's electric grid was already antiquated before the storms hit. So you really have to ask the question: why, why would we rebuild it to that standard? I think there is broad agreement, I've talked to colleagues in the other body, and the other side of the aisle. Congress needs to provide greater flexibility in how Stafford Act funds can be used. I certainly am going to work with my colleagues and the administration to implement that change.

We also know that more hurricanes will impact the islands in the years to come. We're going to see poles that will break, lines that will come down. Roads and bridges will wash out. Residents will face flooding and mudslides. Communities will be disconnected from each other and from a central grid. Some of that is the reality of living on an island in a tropical location.

But, again, the question we need to be probing is, what can we do about it now? Right now.

Restoring electricity is the immediate priority. It has been out for far too long, and that is harming the health of both local residents and their economy. And when I say health, I think about things like mental health. Think about being without power for 60 days plus, think about

what that means. We see pictures of kids who are trying to do their homework with the little flashlights of their cell phones. But in Puerto Rico where we were, schools were not open and have not been open for two months now. Think about what happens from an educational perspective. So when we talk about health, I think we need to be more expansive in our understanding of what the impact to these islands have been. These conditions are awful, and tragic, but they are also an opportunity to work together to rebuild the electric grids in a smarter manner—whether through microgrids, distributed generation, burying the lines where possible, direct current versus alternative current, or some other manner.

I think we need to be looking at this going forward with a few things in mind:

- Making the grid more resilient to future weather events;
- In case of damage from a future storm, bringing the timeframe for repairing the grid on par to what we see here in the United States. I think we recognize that any one of the fifty states here, whether you are on the mainland or like Hawaii or Alaska, apart from the continental United States – nowhere would we accept the fact that the people have been without power for two months, particularly the numbers of people we are talking about;
- But also we need to be working towards bring down the overall cost of electricity, certainly compared to the pre-storm prices.

We are fortunate to be joined by a very distinguished panel this morning, and we will have an equally distinguished panel as this one concludes. These folks are here today to help us better understand the conditions on the ground, what more needs to be done at the federal level, and what a future electric grid could look like. All of our witnesses can be part of the solution, and I'm hopeful that this hearing will be a step in that direction.

Ranking Member Cantwell, I will now turn to you for your opening remarks.

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