

Congress of the United States

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Testimony submitted by: Congresswoman Stacey E. Plaskett (VI)

Thank you Chairman Calvert, Ranking Member McCollum, for the opportunity to testify on the Department of the Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies Appropriations Bill, which will reflect federal support for United States territories and possessions over the next fiscal year. Importantly, this legislation will serve as a statement of the commitment from the federal government to address some of our most pressing local needs.

In the United States territories, there are nearly 4 million Americans, and we are too often left out of important programs or underfunded compared to benefits available to Americans living on the mainland United States. As a result, it is more difficult for the islands to improve economic conditions. Data from the Bureau of Economic Analysis illustrates the economic challenges facing the insular areas. The islands must transition from 100 percent reliance on imported oil to a clean, sustainable energy future and relief from power rates three times the national average.

The territories continue to suffer from high unemployment. Last year the unemployment rate in the U.S Virgin Islands exceed ten percent. The economic picture is corroborated by data indicating population decline over the previous decade.

By their geography, the territories are critically vulnerable to unique natural forces of living in an island environment – hurricanes, tropical storms and sea blast. As a result, they face a formidable challenge in adapting and responding to the effects on infrastructure, economic development, food security and natural resources.

The Office of Insular Affairs is responsible for generally administering the federal government's relationship with the territories on behalf of the Secretary of Interior. Top priorities for the OIA have traditionally included initiatives for economic and infrastructure development. OIA assistance to territories account provides critical funding to support construction and maintenance of infrastructure such as medical centers, schools, and wastewater systems, in addition to assistance for climate change adaptation planning, all of which address top concerns identified by island leadership.

OIA assistance to the territories has seen an overall reduction in funding over the last 10 fiscal years. I would like to stress that it has

been over 20 years since the Virgin Islands has had sufficient resources to build a new school.

In order to maintain and improve quality of life, create economic opportunities, and promote effective governance in the territories, I am here before you to strongly urge an increase in the budget of the Office of Insular Affairs for its activities in technical and maintenance assistance to the territories.

While I fully understand that we need to look for ways to reduce the deficit, abandoning our responsibility to provide safe and reliable infrastructure in the territories, and build resilience to the impacts of climate change, is not the way to go.

The territories should not be forced to compete among themselves for the already inadequate funds they receive. An increase to that account would go a long way in resolving this issue.

Lastly, I would like to touch on the National Park Service budget. National park sites on the U.S. Virgin Islands include some of our country's most iconic tourist destinations. They also provide critical protection for terrestrial habitat, as well as opportunities for education and volunteerism in parks. I have been pleased to see increases in

federal support for national parks in the U.S. Virgin Islands, and I would also like to urge for that to continue.

Thank you for the opportunity to present my testimony.