

USVI WRITTEN TESTIMONY

HOUSE COMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT AND REFORM SUBCOMMITTEE ON ENVIRONMENT



Recovery, Resiliency, and Readiness- Contending with Natural Disasters in the Wake of Climate Change (Climate Change, Part III)

Good Afternoon Chairman Rouda, Ranking Member Comer, and Members of the Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on the status of the Recovery from 2017 Hurricanes Irma & Maria and the challenges that climate change poses to federal disaster preparedness and recovery. The 2019 hurricane season is one that is being faced with great trepidation but also the residents of this Territory are armed with a greater understanding of preparedness. The Territory is still vulnerable, as aspects of the infrastructure are still compromised.

The Virgin Islands Territorial Emergency Management Agency (VITEMA) began preparedness efforts and have validated shelters, confirmed the availability of commodities and delineated plans for dissemination of these commodities and other resources in the aftermath of any event. Governor Albert Bryan, Jr. has issued a directive to all Agency heads, particularly leads of the Emergency Support Functions to ensure readiness for this hurricane season.

The Virgin Islands Office of Disaster Recovery was established in February of 2019 and serves as the center of coordination for all recovery functions. It provides coordination and oversight of all recovery dollars available to the Territory. Efforts are at full bore to bring our critical infrastructure and facilities online. To date we have opened the temporary facilities at the Myra Keating Clinic on the island of St. John. We are working to finalize the temporary facilities at the Juan F. Luis Hospital on St Croix and completing the damage descriptions to finalize funding for the repair of the Roy Lester Schneider hospital on St. Thomas. Residents are still however being flown off-island to access critical care that otherwise cannot be provided by our health care facilities. This has a detrimental financial impact to the Territory's public health system as much needed revenue to support our institutions leave with these patients.

The Territory brought all schools back in session by incorporating the usage of temporary modular classrooms and consolidation of schools on a single campus. To date, three schools are candidates for full replacement. We continue to work with FEMA to approve the industry standards to finalize fixed cost estimates for the replacement or repair of all schools.

The repair of our roads is also a priority area of focus. The Territory has engaged Program Directors from FEMA Public Assistance, Department of Interior, Department of Transportation-Federal Highway Division and HUD CDBG-DR to discuss strategies for the coordination of federal funds on road projects in particular. This effort is aimed at reducing any undue administrative burden to the Territory and ensure maximum utilization of available funding.

The greatest progress has been made in the area of energy. Over 1,121 composite poles have been installed to date and engineering work has commenced to facilitate the undergrounding of power lines. Plans are also underway to strategically build photovoltaic plants with battery storage with the micro grid concept in mind.

Housing remains a vital area of concern as we still have families with compromised roofs covered with tarpaulins that have exceeded their life expectancy. As you can imagine, this situation is less than ideal going into the hurricane season. Through the FEMA approved Sheltering and Temporary Essential Power (STEP) Pilot Program, the Territory has been able to repair 7,200 homes. The Virgin Islands still has 3,563 homeowners who need repairs of varying magnitude. The Territory has developed the EnVIision program funded through the Community Development Block Grant Program- DR to address the remaining families. Repairs are slated to begin in August 2019.

The Territory recognizes and appreciates the efforts of Congress for the provisions in the Bipartisan Budget Act of 2018 that provided special considerations for the complexities of the Recovery efforts in Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands. The additional assistance of \$27 million along with the special considerations for inclusion of additional damages in the repair versus replacement calculations in the Disaster Relief Bill H.R. 2157 will prove extremely valuable in our efforts towards increased resilience.

The U.S. Virgin Islands recognizes the potential risks and increase challenges due to Rising Sea Level, Temperature Increases and Precipitation Changes. The Territory is susceptible to several

climate-induced natural hazards. The most prevalent are hurricanes, which induce coastal flooding, riverine (rain-driven) flooding, and destructive winds. Of all the hazards that can affect the USVI, several can be affected by climate change which can be manifested in days that feel extraordinarily hot, rainfall patterns, intensified hurricanes, large swells from distant ocean storms, and wildfires. It has been predicted that if the rate of sea level rise accelerates, and extreme predictions come to pass, two feet of sea level rise in 2050 will cause 23 critical facilities, 13 miles of underground electric lines, and 199 structures (92 on St. Thomas, 67 on St. Croix, and 40 on St. John) to experience flooding in the Territory. The Territory is working to understand its vulnerabilities and devise strategies to mitigate the effects of climate change. The Territory is acutely aware of the need for adequate planning and is taking advantage of all the funding available for planning and for mitigation.

The Virgin Islands Territorial Emergency Management Agency (VITEMA) in conjunction with the University of the Virgin Islands is developing a Mitigation and Resilience Plan for the Virgin Islands (HMRP). The updated HMRP will be the result of a multi-sectoral planning effort that integrates principles and elements of resilience, sustainability, and climate adaptation leading to the ultimate development of mitigation strategies. The University of the Virgin Islands (UVI) will lead this multi-year planning effort and work hand-in hand with VITEMA. The results of the plan will be provided to agencies leaders, stakeholders and the public to support building a more sustainable and resilient Virgin Islands.

The Territory understands the potential for the intensification of storms and through legislation mandated the auto adoption of the IRC and the IBC building codes. This will ensure that the Territory is building to the latest standards. There is irrefutable evidence that stronger building codes lessens the devastation after wind events. The FEMA Mitigation Assessment Team reported that homes constructed after the first major update to the Territory's Building Code reported little or no damage. Most of the homes experiencing damages were built before the major code update in 1996. FEMA worked with the Virgin Islands Department of Planning and Natural Resources (VI DPNR) to provide Recovery Advisories and update the Stronger Home Guide after the 2017 storms for additional guidance in reconstruction which were adopted by the Territory.

The Territory is working to strengthen its enforcement arm of the VI DPNR through a FEMA Hazard Mitigation Grant of 7.3 million dollars. Together with FEMA, a goal has been set to incorporate mitigation in 100% of all projects as applicable.

For the first time, the Virgin Islands was added to the U.S. Drought Monitor map on June 6, 2019. Drought monitoring will begin in the month of June. The islands of St. Thomas, St. John and St. Croix will each be mapped separately. Additionally, the USVI will identify and assess opportunities to employ natural solutions for climate adaptation in at least 25% of mitigation projects.

The Territory is still a long way from full recovery from the two (2) catastrophic hurricanes that not only wreaked havoc of historic proportions on our critical infrastructure but to the treasury of the USVI Government as well. The financial impact of the back-to-back storms was \$11.25 billion; and the projected revenue loss from the storms is approximately \$576 million. Projects funded under FEMA's Public Assistance program are estimated to cost \$5 billion with a 10% match requirement which totals approximately \$500 million. As one would imagine, the identification of funds to meet the match requirements is of significant concern in light of the Territory's fragile financial condition. For greater perspective, the annual budget of the Government of the Virgin Islands is \$1.32 billion; the annual General Fund is approximately \$800 million for Executive branch departments and agencies.

Navigating through the bureaucratic maze at times is very daunting and relief is never provided as quickly as needed. The Territory however continues to work closely with its federal partners to address the challenges and utilize available funding to incorporate sustainable solutions in our rebuilding efforts. I will remain available to answer any questions you may have.

Thank you.