

Chairman Gregg Harper
Opening Statement
“Update on the Restoration of Puerto Rico’s Electric Infrastructure.”
April 11, 2018

The Subcommittee convenes this hearing today entitled “Update on the Restoration of Puerto Rico’s Electric Infrastructure.”

In September 2017, Puerto Rico was hit by two unprecedented hurricanes in a two-week period. On September 6, Hurricane Irma struck the island as a Category Five storm. Over 1 million residents lost power. While still recovering, Hurricane Maria ravaged the island on September 20, 2017. 1.47 million customers lost power as the storm brought 150 mile per hour winds and 25 inches of rain to the island. Regrettably, many Americans lost their lives while others went months without access to potable water or electricity. Over 50,000 residents still don’t have power today.

On behalf of the Committee, I want the citizens of Puerto Rico to know that our thoughts are with you as recovery efforts continue. This Committee will continue working to ensure that everyone in Puerto Rico has access to clean drinking water, healthcare, reliable telecommunications, and electricity. Today, we look forward to hearing about ideas that could prevent another prolonged loss of power like Puerto Rico is experiencing from happening again.

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[IF GONZALEZ-COLON IS PRESENT:]

I am pleased that we are joined here today by Representative Jenniffer González-Colón from Puerto Rico. She has been a tireless advocate for Puerto Rico and has been on the front lines of hurricane recovery efforts since day one. Thank you for being here with us for this important hearing.

I also want to thank Chairman Walden for his leadership on hurricane recovery issues, including holding multiple hearings and organizing a bipartisan group of members to visit Puerto Rico last December to see the damage and challenges facing the island.

The recovery of Puerto Rico’s electrical infrastructure has been a challenge for a variety of reasons, including bureaucratic issues, geographic isolation from responders and crews, difficult mountainous terrain, supply issues, and limitations of the existing electric infrastructure.

In the aftermath of the storms, the Puerto Rico Electric Power Authority, or PREPA, chose not to request mutual assistance from other utilities and instead

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relied on contractors to restore the grid. After the Governor of Puerto Rico requested the federal government to provide assistance, in late September FEMA tasked the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers with restoring the island’s power.

Rebuilding an electrical grid is not a mission typically undertaken by the agency—yet the Army Corps has used its expertise to spearhead rebuilding efforts by hiring contractors and providing logistic support. On October 31, 2017, PREPA finally requested mutual assistance, but lacking existing assistance agreements, crews did not arrive until earlier this year.

Currently, restoration is coordinated by the unified command of FEMA, the Army Corps, PREPA, and a Power Restoration Coordinator who is joining our second panel today. The Army Corps of Engineers’ mission assignment to rebuild the electrical grid ends on May 18, 2018. As of last week, power has been restored for 96.6% of customers.

The remaining work to be done—sometimes referred to as the last mile--is in the difficult mountainous region, often requiring the use of a helicopter to access

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work sites. We look forward to hearing from our witnesses today about what it will take to get 100% of customers back online.

One of the goals of this hearing is to explore the future of Puerto Rico’s electrical grid. How do we prevent another sustained loss of power? The tragic circumstances in Puerto Rico provide us with an opportunity to build an electrical grid that is more reliable and able to withstand future storms. The Department of Energy will play a key role developing this plan moving forward and we are eager to learn more from DOE about how the role of federal agencies will shift during the rebuilding phase of operations.

Finally, we look forward to hearing more about the report entitled *Build Back Better: Reimagining and Strengthening the Power Grid of Puerto Rico*. Written by numerous organizations from both the private and public sector, including Navigant Consulting who is joining us today, the report provides a detailed plan on how to establish an electrical grid in Puerto Rico that withstands Category Four hurricanes at an estimated cost of 17 billion dollars.

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I welcome and thank the witnesses, and look forward to their testimony. I
now yield to the Ranking Member from Colorado, Ms. DeGette.