

Opening Statement of Chairman Greg Walden
Subcommittee on Energy
Hearing on “The 2017 Hurricane Season: A Review of Emergency Response
and Energy Infrastructure Recovery Efforts”
November 2, 2017

(As prepared for delivery)

The 2017 hurricane season has been among the worst in recent memory. Four major storms have wreaked havoc all along our Gulf Coast, and most recently, in Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands. While fuel supplies and electricity have been restored on the mainland, a humanitarian crisis is unfolding in Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands.

As we often do following natural disasters, it is not uncommon to see stories in the news about heroics and acts of personal sacrifice and kindnesses. We trust that our policy-makers can put aside their differences to do what is in the best interest of the country. We’ve already passed supplemental disaster relief funding this Congress, but we understand that more is needed and we will continue to work with the administration and our colleagues so that our fellow citizens can get the additional resources they need to recover and rebuild.

In this committee, we roll up our sleeves and search for solutions to the various challenges that present themselves after a major disaster. We want to make sure that the agencies under our jurisdiction are well prepared and responding appropriately—both now and when the next storm comes. If they are lacking certain authorities to expedite recovery, we want to know about it, so we can fix it.

We want to be practical and forward thinking – how can we help ensure the relevant federal response is well coordinated with state, local, and industry responders? How do we ensure decisions are made to guarantee taxpayer funding provides the maximum benefit for those in need? If we need to rebuild, what can we do to make our infrastructure more resilient?

Because of this committee's jurisdiction over public health, emergency telecommunications, and the supply and delivery of energy, we will be gathering facts, perspective, and lessons-learned. We have already heard from witnesses on an Oversight and Investigations subcommittee hearing about HHS's public health preparedness for and response to the hurricanes. We will soon examine the disaster response relating to environmental hazards and telecommunications as well.

But today we are focusing on emergency response and energy infrastructure recovery – both for fuel supply and the electric grid. This year we've already been confronted with several different challenging situations: historic flooding in Houston, possibly the greatest evacuation in Florida's history, and an energy crisis in Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands that could leave millions without power for months to come.

We may take for granted how lucky we are to flip the switch and have the lights come on. For our citizens in Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands, however, almost every aspect of life has been disrupted. Hospitals without external generators cannot serve their patients -- getting that power restored is critical. Water treatment plants without power threaten the health of individuals that rely on them for safe water. And those who live in remote areas that do not have access to fuel are cut off from even the most basic necessities.

The witness panels today will provide important perspectives about the state of current fuel and electric supply recovery efforts, what worked and what could be done better under the urgent circumstances of the hurricanes, and what may be considered in the future.

I expect that this will be an excellent hearing for us to identify vulnerabilities and assess what is needed to better prepare and respond to future storms and disasters. And with that I want to thank our witnesses for being here today.