



COMMITTEE ON
ENERGY & COMMERCE
DEMOCRATS
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Pallone on Environmental Impacts of Hurricane Season

“This is a humanitarian crisis and we must do everything we can to fix it.”

Washington, D.C. – *Energy and Commerce Committee Ranking Member Frank Pallone, Jr. (D-NJ) delivered the following opening remarks today at a Subcommittee on Environment hearing on “Response and Recovery to Environmental Concerns from the 2017 Hurricane Season.”*

Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Environmental impacts from this season’s hurricanes have wreaked havoc and continue to threaten public health in serious and unacceptable ways. The federal government’s response to these hurricanes has been disorganized and in the instance of both Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands, it has been, too little, too late. We must step up our efforts.

Two weeks ago, the Subcommittee on Energy held a hearing focused on energy infrastructure recovery efforts, which is a central and ongoing concern. Last week we saw a major setback in the recovery of the electric grid in Puerto Rico, when a repaired transmission line failed. And today – more than two months since Hurricane Maria – more than half of the island is still without power. That is adversely affecting everything from health care to access to safe drinking water. This lack of electricity puts lives at risk, and must be addressed. Unfortunately, at this point it does not appear that any agency within the federal government is standing up and taking full control of this effort. The Army Corps and FEMA say the other is in charge. That’s unacceptable – someone needs to take the lead now.

This is also far from the only challenge facing communities in Texas, Florida, Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands. First and foremost is the lack of safe drinking water. This has been a problem in all of the areas affected by these hurricanes, and it continues to threaten lives. The severity of these issues show the weaknesses in our drinking water infrastructure and how important it is for our drinking water systems to be more resilient to extreme weather and climate change.

Drinking water infrastructure has been a priority for this Subcommittee this year, and an issue we have worked on together. Several of the provisions included in the Committee's bipartisan drinking water bill could have helped water systems prepare for these storms. But I think we are learning that we need to do even more, and that we need to provide more resources to these affected areas. I hope we can continue to work together in a bipartisan manner to address the concerns we hear about today.

Superfund sites also pose serious risks when natural disasters strike. Several of these dangerous sites were damaged during this hurricane season, and we are still struggling to understand the health impacts of that damage. As extreme weather events become more frequent, it is even more important that we clean up Superfund sites quickly and thoroughly. With greater funding for Superfund cleanups, we might have avoided some of the damage we have seen. Again, I hope my Republican colleagues will join me in working to address this issue.

These hurricanes have also led to significant air pollution with real public health impacts. In Texas, we saw an accidental release of benzene at the Valero refinery and a dangerous series of chemical fires at the Arkema plant. In Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands, we continue to see dangerously high air emissions from diesel generators, which could worsen dramatically as debris management efforts begin in earnest.

If we can't get the power turned back on soon, if we can't get safe drinking water out to our citizens, more Americans are going to die. This is a humanitarian crisis and we must do everything we can to fix it.

As Congress prepares the next emergency spending bill, we need to consider all of these environmental concerns and do what is necessary to protect human health and the public welfare. We can and should be doing more to increase access to safe drinking water, to secure and remediate Superfund sites, and to limit air pollution.

I want to thank the witnesses who have traveled here today from Texas, from Puerto Rico, from the Virgin Islands, and from Georgia. I look forward to hearing from you.

I yield back.

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