

Opening Statement of Chairman Greg Walden
Hearing of the Subcommittee on the Environment entitled:
“Response and Recovery to Environmental Concerns from the 2017
Hurricane Season”
November 14, 2017

(As prepared for delivery)

Today marks the third hearing our committee has held to examine the response and recovery efforts for the hurricanes that ravaged our communities along the Gulf Coast and our island territories in the Caribbean.

Hurricane response and recovery deals with human tragedy. These storms didn't just damage property and displace residents, they delayed dreams and fundamentally altered the lives and fortunes of millions of Americans in ways both big and small. While we cannot undo the damage of these storms, we can work to ensure that the federal government is diligently working to aid recovery and not making it harder to get the job done.

Public health risks typically associated with natural disasters, including drinking water contamination and the leaching of hazardous waste, are varied and include heightened risk of infectious disease. These risks can be particularly dangerous for vulnerable populations such as infants, individuals who may be immunosuppressed, and the elderly.

Our job this morning is to better understand **who**, in the context of environmental concerns that bear on public health, is engaging in the tough work to help speed recovery, **what** they are doing or not doing to make hurricane victims' lives better and the challenges they face, **when** will something resembling “normalcy” return, and **where** are the resources coming from to make recovery a reality and what private efforts can be leveraged. We also need to determine whether the federal presence is helping or hurting recovery and, if so, get input on **how** it needs to change.

Some of the areas we hoped to cover today will have to go unaddressed for now. We had hoped to have a Puerto Rico solid waste official testify via video conference about the situation on the ground there. Last week, she confirmed she would testify, but then power went down on the island and our ability to communicate with her was lost.

We also hoped to hear from the Federal Emergency Management Agency about its work leading response efforts and approving funding for recovery activities, but they were unable to find someone who could testify. We will continue working with FEMA to ensure these questions are answered so we can feel confident both statutory authority and administrative practice support rational decision-making and promote the needs on the ground.

That said, I want to welcome our witnesses here today. Some of you have come from great distances, but each of you has important lessons that you will share with us -- and we appreciate it.

I am confident that within the midst of all the bad news, you will provide us stories of dedication, innovation, gumption, and acts of personal sacrifice and kindnesses. These should inspire us to be equally fearless and committed in the work ahead.

In this committee and its broad jurisdiction, 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, responding appropriately, and lives are improving. If not, we want to know about it so we can fix it. 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 this and future storms and disasters.