

Good Morning, today the Committee will hear testimony from Governor Kenneth Mapp of the United States Virgin Islands and Governor Ricardo Rosselló of Puerto Rico.

Last week the Committee received testimony on the Financial Oversight and Management Board of Puerto Rico created under the law commonly known as PROMESA. In that hearing, we examined the need for increased coordination and cooperation between the Puerto Rican government, the Oversight Board and all federal partners now operating within the territory on response, recovery and rebuilding.

The situation in both territories remains overwhelming and urgent. There is no need to remind anyone of the current challenges our fellow Americans are facing to meet basic human needs. Even today, power, access to clean drinking water, food, gasoline for transportation and fuel for other basic needs are all monumental tasks for many Puerto Ricans and US Virgin Islanders.

Fortunately, we have faith that through the continued hard work of all those helping with recovery efforts at FEMA, the Army Corps, the US National Guard and all local agencies within the territorial governments, that conditions are moving forward and a sense of normalcy will return to these American islands. It is the question of how we improve emergency response but also rebuild for the long term that brings us here today.

With the case of Puerto Rico, there are serious concerns from Members of the Committee, and Congress broadly, with the ability and capacity of the current local Government to adequately manage the massive amounts of federal aid dollars that have begun to flow down to the island. The inexplicable contract processes of the Puerto Rican Electric Power Authority (PREPA) and the inability of local managers to reasonably account for previously allocated recovery funds has created a significant trust deficit that endangers the islands' future funding requests. The purpose today is not solely to litigate the past. We don't want to focus on looking backwards. But we must adequately understand what happened in order to chart a responsible path forward.

The questions we have for our witnesses today will center around how we can best ensure that proper oversight mechanisms are in place at all levels in order to coordinate these efforts on the ground and ensure expedient recovery and rebuilding going forward. This is especially challenging given the pre-existing financial and debt crises facing both territories.

Improved coordination and cooperation and the transparent and accountable expenditures of taxpayer dollars are goals all parties working in Puerto Rico and the US Virgin Islands can aspire to achieve. We hope to draw out how best to accomplish this as we hear from our witnesses.

We owe our fellow citizens living in these islands, and all taxpayers investing hard earned money in recovery, the answers to these questions. All of us – both here in Congress and democratically elected at the territorial level, must put aside politics in order to get down to real solutions.

Lastly, before I yield to the Ranking Member, Mr. Grijalva for any opening statement he would like to make, I would like to commend the efforts of both the Congresswoman from the U.S. Virgin Islands, Ms. Plaskett and the Congresswoman from Puerto Rico, Ms. Gonzalez-Colon, for their efforts here in Congress. They both have been working tirelessly throughout this entire time since day one when these hurricanes broke over their shores, and I know they will continue to push for the best solutions we can create here at the federal level to address this enormous challenge.