

Opening Statement

Ranking Member Raúl M. Grijalva

**Full Committee hearing “The Need for Transparent Financial
Accountability in Territories’ Disaster Recovery Efforts.”**

November 14, 2017

I want to welcome and thank our witnesses; the Governors of the Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands. I know that even though you are here, you are eager to get back home to assist your constituents. I am grateful for your time.

Last week’s hearing on Puerto Rico should have been about meeting the most basic needs of the island’s residents after the hurricanes. Instead, it was an attempt to use the hurricanes to weaken environmental and health safeguards and impose greater restrictions on the elected leaders of the territory.

Today, the majority will double down. Not only will they try to, once again, make the case that the Puerto Rico Oversight Board’s powers need to be expanded, but that the federal government should have additional oversight powers over the Virgin Islands.

Meanwhile, nearly two months after the hurricanes we keep reading headlines like: “Puerto Rico’s Most Vulnerable Are Still Waiting for Help 7 Weeks After Maria.” Or, “Weeks After

Hurricane Maria, U.S. Virgin Islands Still Plagued by Food Shortages and Power Outages.” And: “Puerto Ricans face rain and floods in wrecked homes still without roofs.”

Even though FEMA has provided 65,000 tarps to Puerto Rican local authorities to distribute and has 100,000 more in a warehouse, many Puerto Ricans are still without shelter because the government’s estimate is about 250,000 homes on the island suffered complete or partial damages.

Similarly, residents of the Virgin Islands continue dealing with the destruction that caused damage to most of the homes and structures on the islands. Today, only about a third of the electricity there has been restored and losses to key components of their tourism industry are estimated at above a billion dollars.

I don’t think it’s too much to ask to make sure Americans are safe before trying to expand federal power over them.

In the past, recovery has come first.

I don’t recall repeated calls for “financial accountability” after the disasters in New Orleans or New York and New Jersey before making sure those areas received the support they needed.

We didn’t ask Houston or Florida how much debt they owed before providing their residents with sufficient food and shelter and the resources needed to rebuild their communities.

The silence by my Republican colleagues about the performance of the President and his administration in Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands is an endorsement of it. The reprehensible leadership of President Trump in these recovery efforts -- and the failure of our colleagues to call him out on it -- stand out.

To be clear, I think we need transparency and financial accountability with disaster assistance funding. Emergency spending can lead to waste, and we need to be vigilant.

Puerto Rico is no exception. In fact, I teamed up with Ranking Member DeFazio to request an investigation of the Whitefish and Cobra contracts with PREPA.

But there are already mechanisms in law to provide federal oversight. The Inspectors General for FEMA, HUD or the Army Corps have the tools to make sure disaster assistance funding is spent in accordance with the law.

So let's stop blaming the victims. Let's do the oversight on the recovery spending that needs to be done as soon as we have done the oversight to make sure the basic needs of American citizens have been met.