



CONGRESSWOMAN JENNIFFER GONZÁLEZ-COLÓN  
Puerto Rico - At Large

HON. JENNIFFER GONZALEZ-COLON  
OPENING STATEMENT FOR THE NATURAL RESOURCES COMMITTEE HEARING  
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Thank you Chairman Bishop for yielding, but, more importantly, for your leadership and unwavering support of the people of Puerto Rico before and after Hurricanes Irma and Maria struck our islands. I also want to take the opportunity to welcome Governors Rossello and Mapp, who have worked tirelessly for the last month and a half in an effort to bring some sense of normalcy to the lives of our people after the unprecedented disaster inflicted by the storms.

Mr. Chairman, this is an important hearing. The help Puerto Rico has received to date from Congress and the Administration has made a huge difference, and my people are grateful for this. But there is much more left to do, in both the short and the long-term recovery and reconstruction of the islands.

And it is fair that taxpayers would want to know, that the process is being managed transparently and responsibly, with the primary vision of helping the Americans that live both in Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands rebuild their lives, and get back up on their feet. **This is a hearing in which we want to see how can we make that possible** in an efficient and transparent manner.

I do not need to repeat the extent of damages. Members of this Committee, including Chairman Bishop, traveled to the islands and witnessed the human tragedy unfolding in Puerto Rico and the US Virgin Islands. Governor Rossello has informed that the recovery will require at least \$95 billion, and this is just a preliminary, yet very

conservative estimate. Furthermore, we must keep in mind that this is happening in an economy that even before the disaster was in disarray and barely beginning to get back up, with a local government that had, to seek the help, of the tools under PROMESA.

In Puerto Rico, as of yesterday, we still had 54% of customers without electricity; 10% without running water; 14 of 67 hospitals open, still were running on power generators; only 8,135 emergency “blue roofs” have been installed out of 40,658 approved; over 2,000 people were still in shelters; only about half the road miles are fully cleared. There is so much work to be done.

We are barely beginning to get over the paralyzed economy, that Hurricane Maria left us, with. Without electricity, manufacturing has come to a stop - that over 30% of our economy. During the time our manufacturing plants were unable to produce, this had an impact to the entire nation: Puerto Rico plants produce 10% of the US's pharmaceuticals and medical devices needs, a 15-billion-dollar market, and shortages were a real threat.

**What Puerto Rico needs is to get people and businesses back to work, or there will be, no lasting recovery.**

It has been mentioned that much of the damage we are facing in Puerto Rico is the result of an inferior level of infrastructure, construction and maintenance. While this could be true in some cases, it must be noted that such, is the necessary result of budgetary and funding limitations imposed upon the territories. Differential treatment in programs or funding, outright exclusion in some cases, be it by law or regulation, results in territories being forced to do the best they can, with its extremely limited resources available because their political status limits their access to federal grants and credit backing or simply the money that is needed to match

federal funds. This also goes to the disparity in funding for health care, which in turn is compounded by the current situation: many more people will need publicly-supported health care and counseling in the face of this situation and will be driven to move away from the island to obtain care. These inequalities need to be addressed by our nation as Americans.

Which leads me to my last point: the disaster inflicted by Irma and Maria has presented Congress with the historic opportunity to reassess the way that public policy is dictated toward millions of its own citizens. The fact that Puerto Rico has become the poster child for underdevelopment under the U.S. flag, should come as no surprise, as any political or economic model founded on the basis of perpetual civic disenfranchisement and inequality is doomed to fail miserably. We should not expect Puerto Rico to have a first class economy when we treat Puerto Ricans as second class citizens. Is this the Puerto Rico we want to go back to? Are we just going to pour billions of dollars to rebuild the island's infrastructure but continue with the dysfunctional territorial political-economic model that President Ronald Reagan once characterized as "historically unnatural" and is the root of its problems?

We will hear today from the Governors on their plans, projections, and how they have carried this burden in the last 7 weeks. I look forward to hearing their vision, not only for an effective recovery process, but perhaps more importantly, the future of our territories.