

House Natural Resources Committee
**Full Committee Oversight Hearing - “The Need for Transparent Financial Accountability
in Territories’ Disaster Recovery Efforts”**

Congressman Mike Johnson (LA-04) Opening Statement

Thank you Mr. Chairman, and thank you to Governors Rosselló and Mapp for making time to come up to D.C. to share your testimony with this committee. I am sure that there is a litany of other priorities on the top of the lists that you would like to be tackling rather than being here, but I am sure you can appreciate the importance of ensuring that there is an appropriate level of oversight during this critical time in Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands recovery.

Last month I made the very difficult decision to vote against the \$36.5 billion disaster relief measure, and I did so because I had very serious concerns about insufficient oversight of federally appropriated funds for emergency purposes. In recent months, the OIG has highlighted too many instances where funds were misappropriated, mismanaged and ultimately did not serve the purpose they were intended for. Even more alarming is the fact that the audits revealing this mismanagement did not occur until years after the funds were authorized.

This is an issue for numerous reasons. For example, the needs of the communities the funds were intended to help did not fulfill their purpose. All of the good the funds are intended for are shouldered by hard-working taxpayers, many of which live paycheck to paycheck. Untold millions of dollars have been allocated for disaster relief without the proper oversight. This is truly a travesty for everyone.

The recovery in Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands is slow going and each day that passes, the toll to the communities and the costs associated with the recovery continue to grow. The recovery effort in Puerto Rico in particular is mired with what appears to be a territory at war with itself and a scandal that has captivated a nation - I am referring to the Whitefish contract, of course.

Governor Rosselló, in your written testimony, you advocate for the need to reform the *Stafford Act*, highlighting that you believe the bedrock of FEMA’s successes and failures are, “...driven by the assumption that the state level government dealing with a disaster will have functioning computers, telephones, and workforce that can navigate these obstacles.”

You go on to imply that the fault falls on the federal government’s supposed failure to anticipate such a massive disaster to the U.S. or its territories and prepare accordingly. You claim, on multiple occasions, that natural disasters like that suffered by the people of Louisiana in August of 2005 are in fact **NORMAL** and do not reach the same level of crisis as that of Puerto Rico.

Sir, I must inform you that you are simply wrong and your testimony has glaring holes in the facts. I am especially concerned that your testimony focuses on Baton Rouge, but not the remainder of the State. Much of the devastation that was felt was in New Orleans and the ramifications are still being felt today in parts of the community.

Given what appears to be a severe misunderstanding of how natural disasters have impacted the States in the past, I am going to take this opportunity to educate you on the realities faced by my home State following Katrina.

- Katrina is amongst the five deadliest hurricanes in the history of the U.S.
- Until Hurricane Harvey, Katrina was the costliest hurricane
- 1,833 lives were lost – **1,577 were lost in Louisiana alone**
- Nearly 900,000 people lost power
- Between 70% and 80% of homes were damaged in St. Bernard Parish, St. Tammany Parish and Plaquemines Parish
- 300,000 homes were destroyed or rendered uninhabitable in the City of New Orleans
- Katrina and Rita, combined, destroyed 217 square miles of Louisiana coastal wetlands
- In addition to requesting State and Federal assistance, the people of Louisiana organized and helped one another during the immediate crisis and the years that ensued – Cajun Navy.

What happened and is continuing to happen in Puerto Rico is a tragedy. I find it even more devastating that you seem intent to pit tragedy against tragedy and finger point at everyone other than your administration for the resulting situation the people of Puerto Rico find themselves in.

Your administration appears to have had next to zero levels of preparedness to fulfill even the basic needs to coordinate with FEMA and restore Puerto Rico to what was, quite frankly subpar operations to begin with. What is lacking in your testimony appears to be any responsibility.

I do expect to see more of a proactive response from you moving forward. At times like this, it is imperative that those in a position to make a positive impact focus on helping the community, not try to stymie progress or be divisive or place blame. I was very disappointed to read your testimony and hope to see more from you in the future. Our fellow Americans are depending on you to do better.

Following Katrina, Louisiana reflected upon what needed to be done to improve upon emergency responsiveness in order to prevent similar tragedies in the future. I sincerely hope you will take the time to do the same.