

Committee on Natural Resources
Oversight Hearing
1324 Longworth House Office Building
March 27, 2019
10:00 am

Hearing on “*Examining the Department of the Interior’s Spending Priorities and the President’s Fiscal Year 2020 Budget Proposal*”

Questions from Rep. Jenniffer González-Colón (PR – At Large) for Scott J. Cameron, Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary, Office of Policy, Management, and Budget, U.S. Department of the Interior

1. The U.S. Department of the Interior has an important presence in Puerto Rico. For example, the National Park Service administers the San Juan National Historic Site, a UNESCO world heritage site that includes important fortifications from the Spanish colonial era, including Forts San Cristóbal, San Felipe del Morro, and San Juan de la Cruz, in addition to three-fourths of the city walls surrounding Old San Juan.

On June 11, 2018, my office received a copy of a letter sent to the Superintendent of the San Juan National Historic Site inquiring about the status of the masonry preservation program. Specifically, the Puerto Rico State Historic Preservation Office sent the letter seeking clarification from the park about the status of about 40 to 60 expert masons whose jobs were at risk of being eliminated. As far as we currently know, this letter has never been replied.

Do you know what is the status of the masonry program at San Juan National Historic Site? What solutions has the Department thought of or considered in the current budget request to ensure that the only NPS site in Puerto Rico is not left without the expertise that is needed to maintain this world class monument? Can one solution be the use of fee dollars of the funding sources?

2. What impact did the late approval of the FY 2019 budget have in the contracting process for needed infrastructure projects that the Department's bureaus must complete?

3. The Department of the Interior's presence in Puerto Rico is also seen through the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, which administers 5 National Wildlife Refuges on the Island. These are the Desecheo, Laguna Cartagena, Cabo Rojo, Culebra, and Vieques National Wildlife Refuges.

National Wildlife Refuges such as the ones located in Puerto Rico serve a vital purpose for the Nation, providing lands and waters for thousands of species of wildlife and plants, and sanctuary for hundreds of threatened and endangered species. I am therefore pleased that the President's budget request for the National Wildlife Refuge System is \$509.5 million, an increase of \$23 million from Fiscal Year 2019 CR.

Can you explain how the Department intends to allocate these additional \$23 million? In your view, how does the President's budget strengthen National Wildlife Refuges across the Nation, including those in Puerto Rico?

Would your office be able to provide a summary of how each of the five National Wildlife Refuges in Puerto Rico would benefit from this increase in funds?

4. A couple of days ago, a bipartisan delegation of members from this Committee visited the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Iguaca Aviary in El Yunque National Forest in Puerto Rico. This aviary is an important component of the Puerto Rican Parrot Recovery Program, which seeks to protect and manage wild and captive parrots to eventually downlist the species from endangered to threatened.

The Puerto Rican parrot, the only remaining parrot endemic to the United States, is one of the most endangered species of birds in the world. During our visit, we were

informed that after Hurricane Maria, only 2 of the 56 wild parrots in El Yunque survived. Fortunately, the Iguaca Aviary currently holds 221 captive parrots.

As Puerto Rico's sole representative in Congress, I am naturally very interested in making sure the Puerto Rican Parrot Recovery Program succeeds and ensuring the Fish and Wildlife Service's Iguaca Aviary has all the resources its needs to carry out its mission.

Can you discuss how the President's budget request seeks to allocate resources and prioritize programs to protect endangered species, such as the Puerto Rican parrot? For example, it is my understanding that the Fish and Wildlife Service request includes \$240 million for Ecological Services. Can you elaborate on how the Department intends to use these funds?

5. I would like to briefly discuss the budget request for the U.S. Geological Survey, which played a pivotal role in Puerto Rico after the impact of Hurricanes Irma and Maria in 2017. For instance, landslide experts from the agency traveled more than 600 miles overland across the Island's mountains and conducted helicopter surveys to assess the extent and effects of landslides – which totaled more than 40,000.

The President's budget for the Geological Survey includes \$3.5 million for the Landslide Hazards Program. The request also states that during 2020, the Survey will deploy storm sensor housing in Puerto Rico, the West Coast, and Hawaii.

Can you elaborate on these proposals and on how the FY20 budget request for the Geological Survey in general seeks to safeguard communities across the Nation from natural hazards and disasters?