



CONGRESSWOMAN JENNIFFER GONZÁLEZ-COLÓN

PUERTO RICO - AT LARGE

House Committee on Natural Resources Oversight Hearing

“Puerto Rico’s Post-Disaster Reconstruction and Power Grid Development.”

**11/17/2022 2022, 10:00am, ET, in and via Cisco WebEx
1324 Longworth House Office Building**

Thank you, Mr. Chairman and Ranking Member Westerman.

Puerto Rico has been facing a long and tough recovery in every sense of the word.

It has been five years since Hurricanes Irma and Maria, yet the effects still linger.

Since then, we have been impacted by other disasters: earthquakes; the COVID19 pandemic; economic slowdowns; and, on the eve of Maria’s fifth anniversary along came, Hurricane Fiona. All while still trying to undertake a fiscal and economic recovery.

The effects of Fiona and the ongoing rains have brought back to our attention that the necessary public works to make our infrastructure more resilient, are going at a snail’s pace.

We still have a vast amount of transportation and public utility infrastructure waiting for the required permanent replacement and improvement to more resilient, climate resistant standards, so it keeps failing again, and we keep having to repair it, again.

The electric grid is the biggest example. Even before Maria hit us it suffered from:

- equipment outdated by decades, suffering from deferred maintenance;
- new plans would be made with every incoming administration at the Puerto Rico Electric Power Authority, wasting time and funds;
- revenues being directed to first pay current expenses, EPA fines, and rising bond debt, leaving none for capital investment.

And, since 2017, PREPA, PRASA, and every other component of our public infrastructure sector has not only needed physical rebuilding, but also fiscal restructuring under the PROMESA Law, that continues to this day.

Following Hurricane Maria, several Members of Congress and Administration officials have visited the Island to assess the damages and provide the resources to assist in its recovery.

But results have been too slow. The first major obligations for permanent infrastructure rebuilding were announced in late 2020. Of over 80 billion dollars in recovery funds, just a third has been disbursed to date.

My constituents hear about all those billions, and they ask a simple question, where are they? They need to see infrastructure recovery TODAY. Not in 2030 or 2040.

Last year, PREPA granted an Operation and Management contract for Transmission and Distribution to LUMA Energy. It was hoped this would bring greater efficiency in the rebuilding of the energy grid. It hasn't!

But what do the people of Puerto Rico see on the ground? Still unreliable service, with constant brownouts: power plants going offline for days and weeks, substations blowing up in a gulf of fire, down transmission lines. And the monthly bill keeps increasing month after month, making our electric bill the most expensive in the nation. Just a couple of months ago my constituents were paying .33 cents a kwh, while receiving the worst electrical power service in the country.

The power utility has been working on virtually no reserves, keeping power plants running that needed to be cycled off for maintenance work and therefore risking damaging them even more.

This past year even before Fiona the electrical grid interruptions continued and when we asked FEMA about it, it turned out that only a small fraction of permanent work projects had been submitted.

I am disappointed that PREPA and the Energy Bureau are not here today: I would have wanted all components of the Energy Sector to be at the same table so that we could end the ongoing blame game and do what the people are screaming at the government to do, give them reliable, stable electrical power service.

So, my constituents rightfully ask, what is being done with the billions of dollars in aid? What are the plans? When will we see results? I truly hope we can get some clear answers to these fundamental questions today. Our people deserve no less.