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STATEMENT by José F. Aponte-Hernández, Chairman, Federal, International Affairs and Status Relations Committee, Puerto Rico House of Representatives, on H.R. 5875, before the Subcommittee on Federal Lands of the Committee on Natural Resources of the U.S. House of Representatives.

Hon. Tom McClintock, Chairman; Hon. Colleen Hanabusa, Ranking Member, and Members of the Subcommittee:

Thank you to the Committee and Subcommittee leadership for convening this hearing and allowing me to address you in support of H.R. 5875.

Any legislation that promotes greater equality for all who are living under the U.S. flag is more than welcomed. I appreciate and welcome the opportunity to support such an effort and congratulate Congresswoman Bordallo, Resident Commissioner González-Colón, Congresswoman Holmes Norton, Congressman Sablan, and Congresswomen Radewagen and Plaskett for co-sponsoring this bi-partisan initiative.

HR 5875 would promote equality and justice in treatment for the U.S. Territories and the District of Columbia in the assignment of funds for fish and wildlife restoration that are raised by taxes on hunting and fishing supplies, under the Pittman-Robertson Wildlife Restoration Act and the Dingell-Johnson Federal Aid in Sport Fish Restoration Act.

Currently, a very low fixed amount of these funds are assigned to D.C., Puerto Rico and the rest of the U.S. Territories. This is because rather than the formula for the rest of the states, which fixes a minimum and a maximum of funding to be adjusted according to geography and participants in outdoor activity, the formula for the territories established fixed amounts, which for some programs must then be split six ways amongst the U.S. Territories.

However, five of those jurisdictions are tropical insular areas where the natural environment and the enjoyment of outdoor activity are major factors in their economies and their quality of life. For instance, D.C. is in the middle of the Chesapeake watershed, one of the most important aquatic systems in the East Coast. So, the need for attention to these issues in these regions is of no less importance than in other parts of the nation.

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FISHING IN PUERTO RICO:

Fishing in Puerto Rico is both recreational and commercial at both sea and fresh water lakes. We have over one thousand commercial fishermen whom generate seven million dollars (\$7,000,000) a year in wholesale and twenty-one million dollars (\$21,000,000) in retail activity. The over 150,000 recreational fishermen in both seawaters and lakes generate over seventy million dollars (\$70,000,000) a year in economic activity.

Especially in the aftermath of the recent weather events and disasters, runoff, silting, and contamination from the disaster debris have impacted many of our bodies of water. One of our most important freshwater lakes, Lake Guajataca, suffered from damage to the dam structure, requiring it to be partly emptied. Sea fishing, of course, suffered enormous losses to the boat fleet and to the shore facilities for fishermen. Our commercial fishermen are mostly small scale, community based, not corporate entities. Fisheries have also suffered for years from the presence of invasive species like lionfish.

HUNTING IN PUERTO RICO:

Each year some 5,000 hunting licenses are issued in Puerto Rico. Hunting in the main island of Puerto Rico is limited to birds, with a pigeon season running from September to October (which did not happen this year due to the disaster situation); a waterfowl season in November and early December; while in the offshore natural reserve of Mona Island, there are both shotgun and bow-and-arrow hunting seasons from December to March to control the populations of wild goats and hogs. The Hunter Education Program in Puerto Rico is supported, in the face of its limited funding, by certified volunteer instructors who lend their expertise to new would-be sportsmen.

In both cases the Puerto Rico Department of Natural and Environmental Resources needs to make sure they are properly cared for, and the Department is extremely dependent on these federal funds even in normal times. However, we are not in normal times. I do not have to remind the enormous disaster recovery task and our public finances situation. Too often nature protection is left behind when money is short. Having these programs available enables the Department to manage the recreational fisheries and wildlife populations to sustain much needed economic activity.



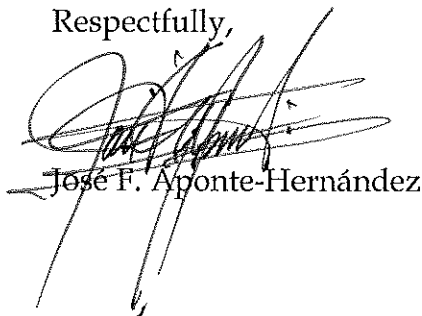
FUNDS THIS YEAR:

From the Department of Interior's own announcement for Fiscal Year 2018, we see that, out of these funds, for fishery restoration Puerto Rico received \$3,519,175, just the exact minimum quantity given to the smallest states such as, for example, Delaware, who have a much smaller geographic extension and smaller number of bodies of water. Meanwhile, on the side of wildlife restoration, we received \$3,452,263 which is about 1.3 million dollars less than the least of the states. The other Territories ended up receiving about a third of what Puerto Rico receives, in each of the different programs. Now, these amounts may seem little in the face of the national budgets of hundreds of billions, but it is significant for our economies, and invaluable for communities in tight economic times who also need to comply with the same conservation standards and policies as the other jurisdictions in the nation.

In Puerto Rico, we were a bit more fortunate than our brothers in other U.S. Territories since we got about a half percent more of the funding but still, we stand for fairer treatment for all. As a devoted and staunch supporter of statehood for Puerto Rico I am not only in favor of more equitable treatment for the Island, but of full parity, with ALL the rights AND responsibilities it entails. Precisely, the same principles that guide our claim serve as a basis for our call for proper treatment for all living in the U.S, who should not be expected to settle for less. This happens in too many aspects- health care, infrastructure, public safety and security -we need to make sure it is corrected.

I fully support H.R. 5875 and respectfully urge the members to look beyond this committee's jurisdiction, at programs under the jurisdiction of all committees you sit in, where these U.S. Territories that are under the same flag get treated unequally. I count on you to do what is right, and I thank you for your attention.

Respectfully,



José F. Aponte-Hernández