



CONGRESSWOMAN JENNIFFER GONZÁLEZ-COLÓN

PUERTO RICO - AT LARGE

Member Day Testimony
FY2021 Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies Appropriations Bill
U.S. House Committee on Appropriations
Rep. Jenniffer González-Colón
Tuesday, March 10, 2020

Chairwoman McCollum, Ranking Member Joyce, and Members of the Subcommittee: thank you for providing me an opportunity to testify on Puerto Rico's priorities for the FY 2021 Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies appropriations bill.

International Institute of Tropical Forestry

I would like to begin by respectfully requesting that the Subcommittee provide robust funding for the U.S. Forest Service's Forest and Rangeland Research account, also known as R&D.

Among the research facilities funded under R&D is the International Institute of Tropical Forestry, which is headquartered in Río Piedras, Puerto Rico and has been in continuous operation since 1939.

Despite being the Forest Service's smallest research unit, the International Institute of Tropical Forestry has been crucial in advancing our knowledge of tropical forests, wildlife, and watersheds at the local, national, and international levels. In the aftermath of Hurricane Maria, for instance, scientists from the Institute assessed damage at El Yunque National Forest—the only tropical rainforest within the National Forest System—to learn how tropical ecosystems respond to and recover from extreme weather events. The Institute similarly helped conduct research on the sustainability of tropical forests on U.S. islands in the Pacific and the Caribbean, further contributing to our understanding of forest conditions across the Nation.

The International Institute of Tropical Forestry has also been vital in supporting environmental conservation projects in Puerto Rico. Through its State and Private Forestry unit, it has helped communities on the Island acquire community forests and has provided technical assistance to farmers and landowners to improve the sustainability of their farms.

Unfortunately, despite the importance of this work, the Forest Service's FY 2021 budget request is proposing to close the International Institute of Tropical Forestry in Puerto Rico, along with the Pacific Southwest Research Station, whose area of responsibility includes California, Hawaii, and the U.S. Pacific Territories. While I recognize the need for budgetary savings, I strongly believe that closing these facilities would seriously hinder scientific production in these jurisdictions and would deprive the Forest Service of crucial research capabilities.

I therefore respectfully request that the Subcommittee reject the proposed closure of these facilities, especially the International Institute of Tropical Forestry in Puerto Rico, and instead provide no less than the FY 2020 enacted level.

Our Parks, Public Lands, and Forests

I also ask that, as you craft the FY 2021 Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies Appropriations bill, you provide robust funding for the operations and management of the National Park System—which includes the San Juan National Historic Site in Puerto Rico—and the National Forest System—which includes El Yunque National Forest, also in Puerto Rico.

Additionally, I request strong support for the National Wildlife Refuge System. We have five National Wildlife Refuges on the Island: Cabo Rojo, Culebra, Desecheo, Laguna Cartagena, and Vieques National Wildlife Refuges.

San Juan National Historic Site, El Yunque National Forest, and the five National Wildlife Refuges not only help preserve our historical and natural treasures, but they are also critical for Puerto Rico's economy, tourism, and outdoor recreation.

U.S. Geological Survey

Lastly, I respectfully request the highest possible level of funding for the U.S. Geological Survey's (USGS) Earthquake Hazards Program, including the Advanced National Seismic System Regional Network Support.

The Earthquake Hazards Program provides the scientific information, situational awareness, and knowledge necessary to reduce deaths, injuries, and economic losses from earthquakes and earthquake-induced tsunamis, landslides, and soil liquefaction.

In Puerto Rico, as one of the Nation's most seismically-active jurisdictions, we know first-hand the importance of this program. Following the devastating earthquakes that impacted the southwestern region of the Island earlier this year, USGS—in conjunction with the Puerto Rico Seismic Network, one of the eleven regional networks within the Advanced National Seismic System—delivered rapid earthquake impact and situational awareness products to support emergency response efforts.

I therefore request your support for these vital programs in FY 2021.

Thank you for your consideration of these requests and for the opportunity to testify.