



CONGRESSWOMAN JENNIFFER GONZÁLEZ-COLÓN

PUERTO RICO - AT LARGE

**Member Day Testimony
FY2020 Homeland Security Appropriations Bill
U.S. House Committee on Appropriations
Rep. Jenniffer González-Colón
Tuesday, April 9, 2019**

Chairwoman Roybal-Allard, Ranking Member Fleischmann, and Members of the Subcommittee: thank you for giving me the opportunity to testify on the Fiscal Year 2020 Homeland Security appropriations bill.

Today, I want to focus my testimony on two matters under the Subcommittee's jurisdiction that are vital to my constituents' wellbeing: (1) the need to prioritize border and maritime security efforts in Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands, and (2) the need to ensure that FEMA's implementation of the Stafford Act Disaster Recovery provisions does not impair the ongoing rebuilding process in the two territories.

Unfortunately, Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands continue to have some of the highest crime rates in the Nation. Law enforcement agencies report that anywhere between 60 and 80 percent of murders committed in the two territories are drug-related. As you are aware, the U.S. Caribbean border has long been exploited by drug trafficking organizations as both a destination and a transshipment point for illicit drugs shipped to the mainland, endangering the lives of Americans in the two territories and the continental United States.

For instance, according to the DEA, 16 percent of all the cocaine coming into the United States in 2017 moved through the Caribbean. In Fiscal Year 2017, U.S. Customs and Border Protection officers seized approximately 66,000 pounds of narcotics in and around Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands, more than any previous year on record.

Given these statistics, it is critical that Congress ensures federal law enforcement agencies, particularly CBP and the Coast Guard, have the necessary resources and assets to enhance border security operations in the maritime area of Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands, home to approximately 3.3 million Americans.

To better understand and confront threats and needs in the U.S. Caribbean border, I am requesting that the Subcommittee include report language requiring the Department of Homeland Security to report on its counter-drug operations and ongoing efforts to address operational needs in the transit zone and throughout the Caribbean basin, specifically in and around Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands. Additionally, I am requesting that the Subcommittee continue including bill language allowing CBP to sustain or increase operations in Puerto Rico with appropriated funds, a provision that has been included in every enacted appropriations bill since Fiscal Year 2015.

My second request pertains to the ongoing disaster recovery process in Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands. In the aftermath of Hurricanes Irma and Maria, Congress amended the Stafford Act—specifically in Section 20601 of the Bipartisan Budget Act of 2018—to allow

FEMA to rebuild outdated infrastructure in the two territories to meet industry standards that would better withstand disasters and hence reduce the need for future federal assistance.

However, FEMA's interpretation and implantation of the "pre-disaster condition" language in that Section, including the definitions of "sites" for purposes of inspection and evaluation, runs counter to the intent of the legislation. For example, under the definitions set forth in the agency's guidance document, there would be over 90,000 "sites" to be inspected, provided cost estimates and subjected to Project Worksheet approval, which would be a monumental challenge to complete by the current October 2019 deadline.

I am therefore requesting report language requiring FEMA to review and revise its recovery policies to ensure implementation of Section 20601 of the Bipartisan Budget Act of 2018 abides by Congress's intent, and to explore and apply further flexibilities, consistent with provisions enacted in P.L. 115-254 (the Disaster Recovery Reform Act), to accelerate the project formulation and funding process in Puerto Rico, including by accepting fixed estimate grants once certified by a licensed engineer, and collaborating with local partners to achieve site evaluations and Project Worksheet approvals within the allotted times.

Once again, thank you for your consideration of these requests and for the opportunity to testify. I yield back the balance of my time.