

USVI TESTIMONY

**HOUSE COMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT AND REFORM
SUBCOMMITTEE ON ENVIRONMENT**



**Recovery, Resiliency and Readiness-
Contending with Natural Disasters in the Wake of
Climate Change (Climate Change, Part III)**

Good Afternoon, Chairman Rouda, Ranking Member Comer, and Members of the Committee.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on the status of the Recovery from 2017 Hurricanes Irma & Maria and the challenges that climate change poses to preparedness and recovery.

The 2019 hurricane season is one that is being faced with great trepidation but also the residents of this Territory are armed with a greater understanding of preparedness. We are still vulnerable, as aspects of the infrastructure are still comprised.

The Virgin Islands Territorial Emergency Management Agency (VITEMA) began preparedness efforts and has validated shelters, confirmed the availability of commodities and delineated plans for dissemination of resources in the aftermath of any event. Governor Albert Bryan, Jr has issued a directive to all Agency heads, particularly leads of the Emergency Support Functions to ensure readiness for this hurricane season.

The Virgin Islands Office of Disaster Recovery was established in February of 2019 and serves as the center of coordination for all recovery functions. Efforts are at full bore to bring our critical infrastructure and facilities online. To date we have opened the temporary facilities at the Myra

Keating Clinic on the island of St. John. We are working to finalize the temporary facilities at the Juan F. Luis Hospital on St Croix and completing the damage descriptions to finalize funding for the repair of the Roy Lester Schneider hospital on St. Thomas. Residents are still however, being flown off-island to access critical care that otherwise cannot be provided by our health care facilities. This has a detrimental financial impact to the Territory's public health system as much needed revenue to support our institutions leave with these patients.

All schools were put back in session by incorporating the usage of temporary modular classrooms and the consolidation of schools. We continue to work with FEMA to approve industry standards to finalize fixed cost estimates for the replacement or repair of all schools.

The greatest progress has been made the area of energy. Over 1,121 composite poles have been installed to date and engineering work has commenced for the undergrounding of power lines. Plans are also underway to build photovoltaic plants with battery storage with the micro grid concept in mind.

Housing remains an area of great concern as we still have families with compromised roofs covered with tarpaulins which have exceeded their life expectancy. Through the FEMA STEP Program, the Territory has been able to repair 7,200 homes with 3,563 homeowners still in need of repairs. The EnVIision program funded through CDBG-DR is slated to address the remaining families.

The Territory appreciates the efforts of Congress for the provisions in the Bipartisan Budget Act of 2018 that provided special considerations for the complexities of the recovery efforts in Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands.

The additional assistance of \$27 million along with special considerations for inclusion of additional damages in the repair versus replacement calculations in the H.R.2157 - Additional Supplemental Appropriations for Disaster Relief Act, 2019 will prove invaluable in our efforts towards increased resilience.

The Territory is working to understand its vulnerabilities and devise strategies to mitigate the effects of climate change:

- VITEMA in conjunction with the University of the Virgin Islands is developing a Comprehensive Hazard Mitigation and Resilience Plan for the Territory. The plan will be the result of a multi-sectoral effort that integrates the principles of resilience, sustainability and climate adaptation.
- The Territory understands the potential for the intensification of storms and through legislation mandated the auto adoption of the IRC and the IBC building codes. This will ensure that the Territory is building to the latest standards. FEMA provided Recovery Advisories after the storms to offer additional guidance for reconstruction.

- For the first time, the V.I. was added to the U.S. Drought Monitor map. Drought monitoring began this month.

The Territory is still a long way from full recovery. Navigating through the bureaucratic maze of the available federal funding is daunting and relief is never provided as quickly as needed. The 2017 hurricanes not only wreaked havoc on our critical infrastructure but to the treasury of the Virgin Islands as well. The financial impact of the back-to-back storms was \$11.25 billion; and the projected revenue loss from the storms is approximately \$576 million. Projects funded under FEMA's Public Assistance program are estimated to cost \$5 billion with a 10% match requirement totaling approximately \$500 million. The identification of funds to meet the match requirements is concerning considering the Territory's fragile financial condition.

We, however, continue to work closely with our federal partners to address the challenges and utilize available funding to incorporate sustainable solutions in our rebuilding efforts. I thank you for the opportunity to provide this update and will remain available to answer any questions you may have.

Thank you.