

**Questions from Rep. González-Colón**

**Question 1. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service administers 5 National Wildlife Refuges across Puerto Rico: the Desecheo, Laguna Cartagena, Cabo Rojo, Culebra, and Vieques National Wildlife Refuges. These play a crucial role in supporting our tourism and outdoor recreation economy. For example, in 2018, the 5 National Wildlife Refuges hosted nearly 338,000 visitors. However, before the impact of Hurricane Maria in 2017, visitation at these refuges exceeded a half million.**

- a. As we reopen our economy, what strategies or efforts is the Service pursuing, or plans to pursue, to increase the number of visitations and promote outdoor recreation at the National Wildlife Refuges in Puerto Rico, including any efforts or collaborations with the surrounding municipalities and tourism authorities?**

**Response:** The outdoor areas of the Culebra, Vieques, Laguna Cartagena and portions of the Cabo Rojo National Wildlife Refuges (NWRs) are open to the public. This includes bike and hiking trails, beaches, and most observation towers/platforms. Projects to improve access and promote outdoor activities at Puerto Rico's refuges include: repairing the Cabo Rojo NWR bike trail; constructing a boardwalk for wildlife observation at Laguna Cartagena NWR; building an observation platform at the Vieques NWR, which is being completed in collaboration with a local nonprofit organization; and repairing roads on Vieques NWR that have improved access to refuge beaches and gazebos/kiosks on popular refuge beaches.

The Service also recently hired a new employee stationed at Culebra NWR that will help to enhance relationships with the community. That refuge is also working closely with Para La Naturaleza and the municipality in developing plans for the restoration of the Culebrita lighthouse, as well as collaborating to improve access, including with trails and the potential for future boat access.

Finally, the Service routinely collaborates with municipal and Commonwealth agencies and tourism entities. Pre-pandemic involvement included providing guided tours and talks, participating in educational fairs and activities, and visiting schools and other organized groups. Many of these activities continued virtually throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. The Service anticipates these types of activities will occur more frequently as conditions allow.

**Question 2. The Cabo Rojo National Wildlife Refuge headquarters were damaged by the 2017 hurricanes and last year's earthquake in southwestern Puerto Rico. It is my understanding that the building will need to be demolished.**

- a. Can you provide an update on the status of these efforts, including how much funding is needed to rebuild the site and any efforts the Service is pursuing to identify the necessary resources to cover these costs?**

**Response:** A contract for the demolition of the existing visitor center/administrative building has been issued and work has begun.

Construction of the visitor center and office at Cabo Rojo NWR is a priority in the Service's Southeast Region. The Service has issued a contract for the design of a new building. The Service estimates the design and construction of the new facilities to be around \$9 million. So far, the Service has secured \$5,237,000 in FY 2022 Emergency Supplemental Appropriations. The Service has identified Great American Outdoors Act funding as a source for the remaining funds needed to complete the rebuild.

**Question 3. It is my understanding that rising sea levels, coupled with the loss of natural protective barriers like mangroves and dunes, are threatening the Cabo Rojo Salt Flats (Las Salinas) located within the Cabo Rojo National Wildlife Refuge. The area's ecological importance cannot be overstated, as it consists of saline lagoons, salt flats, and mangrove swamps that serve as critical habitat for numerous shorebird species. The Cabo Rojo Salt Flats also help support the local economy, both as an important tourism destination and under a special use permit with a private operator who continues to manage water levels as part of a commercial salt-harvesting operation, in accordance with the needs of shorebirds.**

- a. What actions has the Service taken to date to protect the Cabo Rojo Salt Flats from the impact of rising sea levels and other threats like natural disasters? Has the Service funded, or intends to fund, any mitigation projects?**

**Response:** The Service recognizes the importance of the Cabo Rojo salt flats as a natural, economic, and cultural asset to the Municipality of Cabo Rojo and Puerto Rico as a whole. Thousands of tourists visit Cabo Rojo NWR every year. The Cabo Rojo salt flats are valuable migratory and resident shorebird habitat. In addition to the area's ecological value, the shallow and hypersaline lagoons known as Fraternidad and Candelaria have been used for salt extraction for more than 500 years.

Numerous storms, rising sea levels, and possible seismic activity in the area have led to the breach of Bahia Sucia and Punta Aguila coastal dunes/berms, resulting in extensive flooding to the salt flats. The continuous influx of seawater has affected the salt harvesting company's ability to produce salt and the habitat upon which migratory shorebirds depend for foraging and nesting. The Service has worked closely with federal, Commonwealth, and nonprofit partners on short- and long-term solutions for conserving the salt flats. The Service obtained \$1.2 million for a restoration project for Bahia Sucia and Punta Aguila dunes and developed a cooperative agreement with a nonprofit organization ((Protectores de Cuencas, Inc.). Other partners are supporting the project by providing technical expertise or equipment and materials, adding to the funding obtained by the Service. The restoration will be accomplished in three phases: (1) planning and permitting (ongoing), (2) implementation, and (3) post-implementation monitoring. Due to the complexity of the permitting process and the need to incorporate resiliency into the



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project design, the Service anticipates the planning and implementation phases will be completed within a two-year time frame. Various meetings and site visits have been held with these partners and project contractors to start delineating course of actions related to permits, outreach, and community involvement.

**Question 4. One of the marine mammal species that falls under the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's jurisdiction is the West Indian manatee. We've recently seen an increase in the number of manatee deaths in Florida. Moreover, in Puerto Rico, so far this year 11 manatees have died on our coasts, with 8 of those having been killed due to vessel impacts. In fact, it is estimated that 20% of all manatee deaths reported on the Island may be due to watercraft collisions.**

- a. Can you discuss some of the efforts the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is currently pursuing to address these trends and protect the West Indian manatee population, particularly in Puerto Rico and Florida? Does the Service believe its current authorities are sufficient to carry out this work, or would you need additional legislation or tools to strengthen these efforts?**

**Response:** In Puerto Rico, like in Florida, boat strikes are the leading human-related cause of death to manatees. In Florida, key tools to address boat strikes are manatee protection areas, speed zones, and enforcement. The Service is looking for ways to use such tools with our partners in Puerto Rico to improve in-water speed zone regulations and enforcement. The Service is currently working to increase boater awareness of manatees and the dangers presented by boats through signs placed in waterways.

The Service is also supporting efforts to rescue and rehabilitate manatees injured by watercraft collisions through its Prescott Grant program. Over the past two years, the Service provided nearly \$300,000 under the Prescott Grant program to the Caribbean Stranding Network to support their work with sick and injured Antillean manatees.

As for the Unusual Mortality Event (UME) in Florida, the Service is actively engaged in an investigation into the root causes of these mortalities so that it can better respond in the future. The Service and Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) approved a Temporary Response Station in cooperation with Florida Power and Light. The Response Station supports several UME response operations already underway in the central Indian River Lagoon, such as manatee rescues and limited field health assessments. Both agencies have also approved staff to conduct a short-term feeding trial (i.e., supplemental feeding). The Service will continue to work closely with FWC and other partners to restore important habitats and helping to make sure that partners have the resources that they need to adequately respond in the future.



**Question 5. The economic importance of our National Wildlife Refuges is especially true in Vieques and Culebra, where the National Wildlife Refuges cover a large portion of the island-municipalities and support tourism.**

- a. What efforts has the Service pursued to strengthen community relations in Vieques and Culebra and support their economies?**

**Response:** Both refuges are working to maintain and strengthen relationships with the communities and governments of each island municipality. Vieques NWR participates actively in municipal committees and efforts, including Disaster Relief Operations, the Covid-19 Task Force, and the Composting Program. Over 35 special use permits have been issued to operators of wildlife-related small businesses on and adjacent to the Vieques refuge for birdwatching, snorkeling, paddleboarding, and other activities. This, together with operators of transport companies, have resulted in the creation of an estimated 250 jobs on Vieques.

The Service recently hired a new employee stationed at Culebra NWR that will help to enhance relationships with the community. That refuge is also working closely with Para La Naturaleza and the municipality in developing plans for the restoration of the Culebrita lighthouse, as well as collaborating to improve access, including with trails and the potential for future boat access. These efforts will provide additional tourism opportunities on Culebra. Culebra NWR has a number of ongoing biological studies through cooperative agreements with nongovernmental organizations.

In addition, Culebra and Vieques NWRs have a long history of active participation in the Youth Conservation Corps program, employing 5-10 community youth annually for the past 15-20 years.

- b. What actions does the Service intend to take to help DOD and local authorities expedite the cleanup process in the Vieques and Culebra National Wildlife Refuges?**

**Response:** The Service participates in the Vieques Federal Facilities Team and the Culebra Technical Project Committee, which includes the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, U.S. Navy, and the Commonwealth. The Service actively reviews documents related to the cleanup, participates in Team meetings, and participates in community Restoration Advisory Board meetings. For both refuges, the Service prioritizes areas for cleanup, based on public interest in the areas and the natural resources present. Vieques NWR has assisted the Navy with equipment and personnel upon request and cooperates in providing sites needed for locating equipment used to accelerate the cleanup.

**Question 6. What is the current cost of the deferred maintenance backlog at each of the 5 National Wildlife Refuges in Puerto Rico, and at any other U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service site or facilities on the Island? What efforts is the Service pursuing to address it?**

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**Response:** The current deferred maintenance backlog for national wildlife refuges in Puerto Rico totals more than \$15 million. Deferred maintenance projects at these facilities will be considered for funding through the annual budgeting process.

**Question 7. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service was a pioneer in establishing the first official program to restore native shade coffee plantations in Puerto Rico, helping rural communities, wildlife species, and the Island's economy.**

- a. Can you provide us with a report on the history, accomplishments, and challenges of this effort?**

**Response:** Shade-grown coffee plantations are stable agro-ecosystems that provide habitat, nesting, and feeding for many native, endemic, threatened, endangered and migratory species. These plantations serve as ecological corridors that create buffer zones around natural reserves and provide a smooth transition between urban and natural areas. In addition to the benefits for wildlife, shade-grown coffee practices produce better-quality coffee beans, use fewer herbicides and lesser amounts of fertilizers, increase the life span for the coffee trees, and result in cooler field temperature that helps when collecting coffee.

In 1999, the Service, in collaboration with local nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), began working through the Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program to restore shade-grown coffee plantations in the northcentral coffee region of Puerto Rico. These restoration actions are important to the wildlife and support the local rural economy. In 2009, the Service formalized a partnership with Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) and private landowners to expand the initiative throughout the island. Throughout this partnership, the Service has provided technical assistance to private landowners, coordinated tree delivery, demonstrated practices in the field, evaluated the implemented practices through research, and promoted education and outreach.

Since 1999, the initiative has restored more than 5,000 acres, planted more than 150,000 shade trees, and benefited approximately 800 properties and landowners in Puerto Rico. The restoration efforts continue to overcome challenges and to thrive across the island as a result of the commitment of the partners.

- b. Does the Service intend to continue funding shade coffee restoration projects in Puerto Rico through the Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program? If so, what are the needs to fully implement this?**

**Response:** Yes, the Service plans to continue funding these projects since they are important restoration initiatives benefiting trust species, sustainable agriculture, and private landowners. As the Service continues to implement this initiative, we recognize the importance of

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maintaining a strong partnership with the NRCS and local NGOs, increasing support from Commonwealth agencies to develop or modify regulations for promoting shade-grown coffee, and working with partners that may promote shade-grown coffee brands and special eco-friendly and quality certifications to increase its market value and export potential.