

**Testimony of
Peter D. Lopez, Regional Administrator
U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, Region 2
before the
Subcommittee on National Security
Committee on Oversight and Government Reform
U.S. House of Representatives**

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Good morning Chairman DeSantis, Ranking Member Lynch and members of the Subcommittee. I am Pete Lopez, Regional Administrator for U.S. EPA's Region 2, which covers New Jersey, New York, Puerto Rico, the U.S. Virgin Islands and eight federally-recognized Indian Nations. Thank you for the opportunity to appear today to discuss EPA's important role in helping Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands following Hurricanes Irma and Maria.

EXPERIENCE WITH IRENE AND LEE:

In my years of experience as a New York State Legislator, I was intensely involved in a response to a devastating storm like Irma and Maria. In 2011, upstate New York was hit by Hurricane Irene and Tropical Storm Lee. Here, my parents and family members were left homeless and six out of seven counties in my district were placed in states of emergency. My region was devastated by these storms, which was particularly challenging given the geographically isolated areas and socioeconomic conditions. Throughout my experience with Irene and Lee, I developed an understanding of how complicated it can be for isolated areas to recover, and I learned that the more disadvantaged the community, the slower and more painful the recovery.

HURRICANES IRMA, MARIA AND THE CARIBBEAN:

Let me turn to EPA's response and the continued recovery efforts in Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands. I traveled to Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands last October and plan to return next month. The focus of the trip was not to simply observe EPA's work, but to also strengthen relationships with the Commonwealth, Territory and local officials and find creative solutions to pressing local problems.

Responding to hurricanes in the Caribbean presents some unique challenges. The logistical challenges of the island setting and pre-existing weaknesses in the state of the infrastructure in Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands, along with economic struggles of both governments, have been greatly exacerbated by these two hurricanes. EPA has worked closely with the local governments and with FEMA, the U.S. Corps of Engineers and others to make systems operational. This effort has been largely successful, but the work is not complete and there is much to be done.

I am proud of EPA's efforts in the Caribbean. Over the past seven months, EPA has deployed more than 730 people to Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands and spent more than \$53 million on our efforts. Some of the work that EPA has accomplished includes:

- Assessing a total of 300 chemical and hazardous waste facilities – 177 in Puerto Rico and 123 in U.S. Virgin Islands as well as a 32 Superfund and oil sites in Puerto Rico and four in the U.S. Virgin Islands;
- Rehabilitating the Puerto Rico Environmental Quality Board (PREQB) Analytical Laboratory in Monacillo in order to restore it to its fully operational capacity;

- Here, we completed infrastructure, equipment and training needs evaluations and have ordered necessary lab equipment, supplies, and services, including a permanent backup generator which, once installed, will be critical in ensuring the conduct of important lab operations. The lab is scheduled to be back online in late May.
- EPA, working with Puerto Rico and U.S. Virgin Islands governments, completed more than 200 wastewater treatment plant and pump station assessments in Puerto Rico and more than 30 in the U.S. Virgin Islands;
- EPA also worked with the Puerto Rico government to help assess all 114 drinking water plants in Puerto Rico and assessed more than 500 small drinking water systems, many of them cistern systems, in the U.S. Virgin Islands;
- EPA took approximately 240 samples from drinking water systems in Puerto Rico in coordination with the Puerto Rico Aqueduct and Sewer Authority (PRASA) and sampled 228 water systems not run by PRASA. EPA also completed assessments of 237 non-PRASA systems. In the U.S. Virgin Islands, EPA took about 2,400 drinking water samples, mostly from cisterns;
- EPA also performed curb-side pick-up and established 40 household hazardous waste and debris collections centers in Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands. Under the household hazardous waste program, EPA collected over 173,000 items in Puerto Rico and over 135,000 items in the U.S. Virgin Islands, and much of this includes hard to dispose of electronic waste;
- Working with the government of Puerto Rico, EPA has assessed 19 ambient air monitoring sites in Puerto Rico that were shut down as a result of the hurricanes;

- Working with the Commonwealth and Territory, we developed a list of damaged equipment, identified replacement needs, and prepared cost analyses to rebuild and restart the networks. PREQB has restarted several of its monitors and requested a FEMA mission assignment to restore its remaining sites. The equipment is in the process of being ordered;
- EPA worked with the U.S. Coast Guard to remove oil and hazardous substances from 327 of the total 377 sunken vessels.

MOVING FORWARD TO RECOVERY:

As the agency now turns its full focus to recovery in Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands, we recognize that there are deeper economic challenges than most states in mainland United States, so capacity building and measurable positive environmental outcomes are our main goals as we begin our recovery work. To that end, the EPA is developing a *Hurricanes Irma and Maria Recovery Framework for Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands* that will complement the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) led interagency effort to compile a comprehensive recovery strategy for rebuilding from the storm events.

Moving forward, EPA is already working jointly with FEMA, the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) and other partners to further assess disaster recovery needs and develop a joint 180-Day Plan for Puerto Rico and a joint Recovery Support Strategy for the U.S. Virgin Islands. Building on our response work under specific mission assignments from FEMA, our collective recovery efforts moving forward are focused on such critical sectors as:

- PRASA and non-PRASA drinking water facilities in Puerto Rico;

- PRASA’s Wastewater facilities in Puerto Rico;
- U.S. Virgin Islands Water and Power Authority (WAPA) facilities;
- U.S. Virgin Islands Waste Management Authority’s wastewater facilities;
- Impaired stormwater infrastructure in Puerto Rico; and
- Open dumps and landfills in both Puerto Rico and U.S. Virgin Islands, including operations and capacities assessments.

In addition, EPA is collaborating with the Department of Energy (DOE) providing technical assistance to determine the viability of solar energy projects in both Puerto Rico and U.S. Virgin Islands. This will include assessing whether Brownfields, closed landfills, Superfund sites and other open areas have any potential for solar power. Here, we will be reaching out to the government of Puerto Rico and local government and communities to determine whether the islands of Culebra and Vieques would be good candidates for a potential microgrid pilot.

Access to clean drinking water and the support of wastewater infrastructure will remain a top priority. Among the initiatives already identified, we are helping to develop and implement resilience strategies for drinking water and wastewater facilities in both Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands, including a strategy to reduce the clogging of drinking water intakes during heavy rain events, especially in Puerto Rico. We will also look into the viability of connecting schools that do not have sewers to PRASA wastewater systems, as well as aiding smaller, non-PRASA drinking water systems to sustainably get them back on their feet.

EPA has been focused on strengthening solid waste infrastructure and closing open dumps for years, and we will continue to do so. Key to improving the solid waste crises in both the U.S. Virgin Islands and in Puerto Rico is to help those governments develop and implement solid waste management plans and local disaster debris management plans. We also want to encourage the reduction of waste by helping to implement composting pilot projects and recycling capabilities for both Puerto Rico and U.S. Virgin Islands. EPA wants to do what we can to equip Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands with resilient and sustainable energy sources.

Recovery will be a long road, and the funding and process associated with recovery is very different from the funding for response. The viability of EPA's recovery plan relies heavily on our strong partnership with FEMA and fellow agencies, as well as with the relationships we have with the governments of Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands, local communities, non-governmental organizations, and professionals. It is our goal to fully engage with our partners to make the recovery of Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands successful, impactful, and long lasting.

These collaborative efforts will enable all of us to better safeguard the health and safety of the people of Puerto Rico and U.S. Virgin Islands while helping them sustainably protect their natural resources. Thank you again for the opportunity to testify today. I look forward to any questions the Subcommittee might have on EPA's important role in emergency response and recovery efforts.