

STATEMENT

OF

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THE

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“Bureaucratic Challenges to Response and Recovery in Puerto Rico”

Submitted  
By

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## **Introduction**

Good morning, Chairman DeSantis, Ranking Member Lynch, and members of the Subcommittee. I am Michael Byrne, the Assistant Administrator for the Field Operations Directorate within the Federal Emergency Management Agency's (FEMA) Office of Response and Recovery and the Federal Coordinating Officer for the Hurricane Irma and Maria response and recovery in Puerto Rico. On behalf of U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS) Secretary Nielsen and FEMA Administrator Long, thank you for the opportunity to discuss DHS and FEMA's response and recovery efforts in Puerto Rico following the devastating hurricanes in 2017.

## **2017 Hurricane Season**

Last year's historic hurricane season was a true test of the Nation's ability to respond to and recover from multiple concurrent disasters. Three major hurricanes—Harvey, Irma, and Maria—made landfall along the Gulf Coast, in the Southeast, and in Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands. The impacts of these events were substantial. Approximately 26 million people live in counties and municipalities that received disaster declarations as a result of these three storms—roughly eight percent of the entire U.S. population. With the addition of the Wildfires in California, this was FEMA's most demanding year in its 40 year history.

In order to deliver disaster assistance to such a large and dispersed number of survivors, FEMA has worked in concert with our federal partner agencies; state, local, tribal, and territorial governments; and also non-governmental organizations (NGO) and the private sector to ensure a unity of effort that serves the needs of disaster survivors.

Unity of effort is required for disaster response and recovery on any scale. It has been—and will continue to be—especially crucial during response and recovery efforts following last year's hurricane season. All levels of government, non-profit organizations, private sector businesses, and even survivors—each drawing upon their unique skills and capabilities—will need to work together to meet the needs of disaster survivors.

## **Hurricanes Irma and Maria: Impacts and Federal Response**

### ***Hurricane Irma***

On September 6, 2017, the eye of Hurricane Irma made landfall in the British Virgin Islands, just north of the USVI, as a catastrophic Category 5 hurricane. Extreme winds and heavy rainfall ravaged the USVI, particularly St. Thomas and St. John. Hurricane Irma then continued on its path of destruction, passing just north of Puerto Rico on September 7—still as a Category 5 storm—leaving more than one million customers without power.

President Trump approved an emergency declaration for Puerto Rico on September 5, making available Federal assistance for debris removal and emergency protective measures. The President approved a major disaster declaration for Puerto Rico on September 10, making available Federal assistance through FEMA's Individual Assistance, Public Assistance, and Hazard Mitigation Grant Programs.

FEMA's National Response Coordination Center (NRCC) was activated to a Level I (the highest level of activation, with all Emergency Support Functions activated) prior to Hurricane Irma's impacts on the USVI and Puerto Rico. Federal personnel were also pre-positioned in Puerto Rico to coordinate with territorial and municipal officials. This included FEMA staff that operate out of the Caribbean Area Division office located in San Juan, regional personnel from FEMA's Region II (which has responsibility for both Puerto Rico and the USVI), as well as Incident Management Assistance Teams (IMATs) that were deployed to the territory. Additional federal resources and personnel were strategically staged just outside of the storm's path, including ships from the U.S. Coast Guard and the Department of Defense. Once the storm had passed, these additional federal resources and personnel flowed into the territories as part of a unified federal response.

### ***Hurricane Maria***

On September 19—only two weeks after Hurricane Irma hit—the eye of Hurricane Maria passed just south of the USVI on its way to making landfall in Puerto Rico on September 20. The Commonwealth was devastated by Hurricane Maria's powerful winds and heavy rainfall, which severely damaged communications and power grids, destroyed homes, and downed trees across both islands. In its wake, Hurricane Maria—the fifth-strongest storm ever to impact the United States and territories, and the strongest storm to strike Puerto Rico in nearly a century—left nearly all of Puerto Rico's 3.5 million people without power or communications.

President Trump approved an emergency declaration for Puerto Rico on September 18, making available Federal assistance for debris removal and emergency protective measures. President Trump approved a major disaster declaration for Puerto Rico on September 20, making available Federal assistance through FEMA's Individual Assistance, Public Assistance, and Hazard Mitigation Grant Programs. The federal government also immediately launched a massive and unified response and recovery operation, building on efforts from Hurricane Irma.

One day after Maria made landfall in Puerto Rico, there were already more than 2,000 federal staff on the ground in Puerto Rico supporting response and recovery operations. These included a National Incident Management Assistance Team (N-IMAT), Disaster Medical Assistance Teams (DMATs) and FEMA Urban Search & Rescue (US&R) taskforces that were prepositioned to operate immediately following the storm's landfall. At the height of the response efforts, more than 19,000 federal staff from 80 federal agencies (including approximately 3,000 FEMA personnel) were deployed in support of Puerto Rico working around the clock with territorial and local officials to stabilize the situation.

### **Helping Survivors Recover**

FEMA and the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico established the largest domestic sea-bridge operation in U.S. history, delivering more than a billion dollars in commodities, such as food, water, tarps, and construction materials, to Puerto Rico in support of disaster survivors. These commodities were delivered by air, off-road vehicles and on foot, making it the largest and longest commodity delivery mission in FEMA's history.

In one of the largest medical response missions ever, more than 4,700 medical personnel deployed and cared for more than 38,000 survivors.

In total, FEMA has approved almost \$10 billion in response and recovery efforts, in addition to the more than \$1 billion approved and dispersed to disaster survivors by the U.S. Small Business Administration.

FEMA mission-assigned 80 federal agencies with more than 700 mission assignments, supporting power restoration, including temporary power and transmission and distribution line repair, debris removal, temporary roofing, response operations, oil and hazardous material clean-up, disaster case management, and technical expertise and support.

More than \$1.2 billion in FEMA grants are in the hands of homeowners and renters. Survivors are receiving funds for rental assistance or to repair their homes, and to cover other needs such as eligible medical expenses and loss of personal property.

## **Power Restoration Efforts**

### ***Temporary Power***

Power restoration has been a top priority for FEMA following Irma and Maria. On September 22, 2017, FEMA mission assigned the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) to provide emergency power generation to the Commonwealth. Since beginning the temporary power mission, USACE has installed more than 1,900 emergency generators in Puerto Rico. The Hurricane Maria temporary power mission is the largest disaster generator mission in U.S. history.

FEMA, along with its federal and NGO partners, has also worked closely with the Governor and agencies in Puerto Rico to ensure that temporary power support continues to be prioritized for critical facilities such as hospitals, police and fire stations, communications facilities, and water treatment plants.

### ***Emergency Power Grid Repairs***

In order to provide a stable power solution for survivors, FEMA has also supported restoration of the electrical power grid on Puerto Rico. On September 28, FEMA issued a mission assignment to USACE to assist the Puerto Rico Electric Power Authority (PREPA) with interim repairs to segments of the electrical grid to allow temporary restoration across the island. Specifically, USACE was tasked to help restore temporary power and “lead planning, coordination and integration efforts in preparation to execute electrical power grid restoration in Puerto Rico due to impacts caused by Hurricane Maria” and to “develop and execute applicable temporary repairs to the electrical grid to allow interim restoration of system segments as directed by FEMA until the full electrical grid restoration can be implemented.”

As assigned by FEMA, USACE leads the federal effort to repair the hurricane-damaged electrical power grid in support of the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico. USACE is partnering with

PREPA, the Department of Energy (DOE), and FEMA to restore safe and reliable power to the people of Puerto Rico.

Puerto Rico has 2,400 miles of transmission lines across the island and 30,000 miles of distribution lines with more than 300 sub-stations. As of March 7, PREPA reports more than 91 percent or approximately 1.35 of the 1.47 million pre-storm customers who are able to receive electric power have their service restored.

In addition to USACE, FEMA has also mission-assigned the DOE to assist with power grid restoration. The DOE is providing subject matter expertise and technical assistance in support of power grid damage assessments and power restoration efforts in Puerto Rico, in coordination with USACE. Additionally, the DOE is also working to identify various options for the long-term restoration and resilience of Puerto Rico's electric grid.

## **The Road to Recovery: Delivering FEMA's Infrastructure Assistance Programs**

### ***Public Assistance in Support of Power Restoration***

PREPA is ultimately responsible for the permanent repair of power generation, transmission, and distribution infrastructure. However, FEMA and its federal partners (including USACE and DOE) are closely supporting their efforts.

FEMA is primarily supporting the restoration of the Puerto Rico power grid through its Public Assistance program. As of March 9, FEMA has approved nearly \$1.3 billion in Public Assistance emergency work for Puerto Rico.

FEMA is also working with Puerto Rico on the development and execution of Public Assistance permanent work projects, which will include the restoration of utilities—including power. As of March 9, \$245 million dollars in federal assistance has been obligated for emergency repairs related to electrical utilities in Puerto Rico.

On February 9, the President signed into law the Bipartisan Budget Act of 2018. Under authorities given to FEMA in this law, FEMA may provide Public Assistance funding for critical services to replace or restore the function of a facility or system to industry standards without restrictions based on their pre-disaster condition. The law further allows FEMA to provide assistance for critical services to replace or restore components of the facility or system that are not damaged by the disaster when it is necessary to fully effectuate the replacement or restoration of disaster-damaged components to restore the function of the facility or system to industry standards.

FEMA will continue to work with our partners to effectively integrate and implement all of our disaster assistance programs in support of power restoration efforts in Puerto Rico to include working with the U. S. Department of Housing and Urban Development on its authority under the Bipartisan Budget Act of 2018 to provide up to \$2 billion in funding for enhanced or improved electrical power systems.

### ***Public Assistance Alternative Procedures in Puerto Rico***

On October 30, 2017, the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico elected to use Public Assistance Alternative Procedures for all large project Public Assistance funding for permanent work pursuant to section 428 of the Stafford Act. Under authorities granted to FEMA in the Sandy Recovery Improvement Act (SRIA), Public Assistance Alternative Procedures allow applicants to request and obtain funding based on certified cost estimates to repair, restore, or replace a damaged facility. Once FEMA and the applicant agree on the damage assessment, scope of work, and estimated costs, a Public Assistance grant can be obligated. Prior to Alternative Procedures, a grantee would have to fund the project and seek reimbursement upon completion of established milestones. Alternative Procedures is a good option for governments that may not have the ability to pay for these projects up front.

The goals of the Public Assistance Alternative Procedures are to reduce costs, increase flexibility in the administration of assistance, expedite the delivery of assistance, and provide financial incentives for the timely and cost-effective completion of Public Assistance projects. The alternative procedures also allow Public Assistance applicants to retain funding when there are cost underruns and utilize those funds for eligible additional hazard mitigation measures and for activities that improve future Public Assistance program permanent work operations.

Pursuant to the Governor's election of section 428, FEMA will administer Public Assistance permanent work projects in Puerto Rico using the Alternative Procedures. As a condition of receiving funding under these procedures, the President required that the Commonwealth establish a grant oversight authority supported by third-party experts to perform the responsibilities of the grant recipient. On October 23, 2017, the Governor of Puerto Rico ordered the creation of the Central Recovery and Reconstruction Office (CRRO) of Puerto Rico. The CRRO will provide the required grant oversight authority. FEMA will also require that any cost estimate over a pre-determined amount will be reviewed by a third-party independent expert.

### ***Long-Term Recovery***

Puerto Rico faces a challenging road to recovery. These devastating hurricanes struck after a decade of economic and fiscal crisis that had already led to the exodus of more than 10 percent of Puerto Rico's population, and that exodus has only accelerated since the hurricanes. The long-term recovery of Puerto Rico depends on addressing the causes of Puerto Rico's extremely low labor force participation rate and related fiscal crisis. A vital first step is the hurricane recovery mission.

As both the Federal Coordinating Officer and the Federal Disaster Recovery Coordinator for Puerto Rico, I continue to work closely with the government of Puerto Rico and federal response leadership to facilitate disaster recovery coordination and collaboration between federal, territorial and municipal governments, private sector entities, and voluntary, faith-based, and other NGOs.

In order to meet the long-term recovery needs of Puerto Rico, FEMA has fully implemented the structure and functions of the National Disaster Recovery Framework (NDRF) to ensure that

federal recovery efforts remain coordinated and effective across all six Recovery Support Functions (RSFs). For this disaster, FEMA created a strategic solutions-based sector approach to recovery, expanding upon the six RSFs to bring together support for key areas of impact.

In particular, FEMA has leveraged the NDRF and the Recovery Support Function Leadership group to support the Infrastructure Systems RSF, which is led by USACE. In Puerto Rico, the Infrastructure Systems RSF has been subdivided into five sectors in order to address the magnitude of damage across multiple infrastructure systems. These sectors are: Energy/Power; Public Buildings; Water; Transportation; Communications/IT.

Each of the remaining RSFs, Housing, Economic Recovery, Health and Social Services, Natural and Cultural Resources and Community Planning and Capacity Building, coordinates support for its corresponding sector. In addition, there is an overarching sector for municipalities, which includes resources and support from all six RSFs.

## **Conclusion**

Within one month's time, FEMA was responding to three major hurricanes, two of which hit Puerto Rico within two weeks. By the end of 2017, FEMA registered more than 4.7 million survivors for individual assistance —more registrations than for Hurricanes Katrina, Rita, Wilma, and Sandy combined. The Agency has also distributed more than \$2 billion in individual assistance to survivors, processed 133,000 flood insurance claims, and paid out more than \$6.3 billion to policyholders across the country.

In addition to providing financial support, FEMA also deployed thousands of our employees, mission assigned nearly 14,000 staff and service members from various offices of the Department of Defense, and—for the first time ever—the Secretary of Homeland Security extended the DHS Surge Capacity Force to all federal agencies in order to deploy approximately 4,000 employees from across 36 federal departments and agencies. We have also welcomed hundreds of new FEMA Local Hire and Reservist employees to assist with recovery efforts. I cannot recall a more challenging hurricane season, nor a more impressive whole community response, in my history of emergency management.

The road to recovery will be a long one, but FEMA will continue to work with its Federal, state, territorial, tribal, and local partners, as well as Congress, throughout the recovery process. Though the power grid in Puerto Rico was significantly damaged, we continue to see progress in power restoration every day. We will also be in the impacted communities for as long as we are needed.

I am grateful for the opportunity to appear before you today to discuss this important mission, and I am happy to respond to any questions the Subcommittee may have at this time. Thank you.