

Committee on Energy and Commerce

**Opening Statement
of
Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations Ranking Member Diana DeGette**

Update on the Restoration of Puerto Rico's Electric Infrastructure

April 11, 2018

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The 2017 hurricane season was one of the most damaging on record for the United States, and Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands continue to reel from the catastrophic impact of Hurricanes Irma and Maria.

I observed the devastating impact of these storms last November, when I traveled to Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands with Chairman Walden, Ranking Member Pallone, Mr. Griffith, and Dr. Burgess, as well as Mr. Rush, Mr. Upton, and Mr. Shimkus. My colleague Mr. Ruiz also went to the island very soon after the storm.

We witnessed first-hand the effects of a widespread blackout, and saw how damage to the electric grid impacted every aspect of daily life. This long-term blackout caused a humanitarian crisis unseen in modern U.S. history, the impact of which cannot be overstated. A reliable grid is fundamental to Puerto Rico's economy and all aspects of life on the island.

I am concerned that the nightmare for many of our fellow American citizens is far from over, as thousands still do not have power restored today, more than six months after Hurricane Maria made landfall.

And I am concerned that issues with the response, including the award of questionable contracts, may have impeded the response effort.

Missions such as this are why we must have a strong and effective federal government, and strong federal leadership and commitment is needed in Puerto Rico to address not only immediate response objectives but also longer-term recovery, including grid design and rebuilding efforts.

So I hope our witnesses today can help explain why it has taken so long to fully restore power in Puerto Rico, who is actually in charge of restoration efforts—both now and going forward—and what it will take to build a 21st century grid that will help prevent Puerto Rico from suffering another devastating black-out in the future.

It appears that there is little effort being made to modernize the grid or otherwise increase its resilience as part of the restoration process that has been completed to date. FEMA's federal

coordinating officer in Puerto Rico actually described the restoration efforts as a “band-aid,” stating that the system has been “patched back together.”

Mr. Chairman, the situation in Puerto Rico does not call for a band-aid, but instead requires a much stronger and more resilient grid. I hope that going forward Congress can consider legislative improvements to the Stafford Act and other federal authorities so that, where cost-effective, restoration can be to a higher standard.

We need to ensure that the electric grid will not be vulnerable to future storms, particularly with the next hurricane season right around the corner.

But it is clear we are a long way from that goal. Even where power has been restored, service often remains unreliable, as blackouts and service outages continue to affect hundreds of thousands of people and businesses.

Many businesses and facilities such as hospitals, police stations, and water treatment facilities are forced to have generators on hand simply to ensure they will be able to continue operations should the electric grid fail.

I am also troubled to hear that many federal contractors working to restore electricity have already left Puerto Rico or will be leaving in the near future – despite the fact that so much remains to be done.

Although the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers recently announced that they will stay in Puerto Rico until May 18 to focus on restoring service in Puerto Rico’s remote mountainous areas, many contractors have already begun to leave. I am concerned that this will further delay the response and recovery effort, and may prevent us from implementing a more permanent solution for Puerto Rico’s electric grid.

Building a grid for the 21st century will require significant resources and a strong and ongoing federal commitment. As we consider innovative ways to rebuild Puerto Rico’s grid, we must ensure that the process is transparent. And the solution must also include consumer protections and buy-in from the Puerto Rican people and government.

Finally, Mr. Chairman, I urge you not to let this be the last time we meet to discuss these important issues. After Hurricane Katrina, I was part of a group of Members who traveled to New Orleans to observe the recovery efforts. What we found was that Washington’s understanding of the situation was very different from what we were able to observe first hand on the ground. We also found that a brief period of supervision is not enough, and that long-term oversight is necessary to ensure that the agencies responsible for helping a region get back on its feet are really doing their job.

Mr. Chairman, I urge you to continue active and ongoing oversight of this important issue, and consider holding field hearings on the islands so we can continue to understand the grid restoration effort going forward.

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I also want to take a moment to thank Representative Nydia Velázquez. Nydia has been a true leader and a tireless advocate for the people of Puerto Rico. Her leadership has been crucial in focusing Congress, and we are so fortunate to have her strong voice on these issues.

I would also like to thank Resident Commissioner Jenniffer González-Colón, who represents the people of Puerto Rico and has provided steadfast leadership throughout the response effort.

I look forward to hearing from our witnesses. Thank you.