Testimony of
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U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, Region 2
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Good morning Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member and fellow Energy and Commerce Committee members, I am Pete Lopez, Regional Administrator for 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 privilege of joining you today for this important conversation. My testimony today is a snapshot of EPA Region 2's response phase to 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 very similar situation to Irma and Maria. In 2011, upstate NY was hit by Hurricane Irene and Tropical Storm Lee. Here, my parents and family members were left homeless and 6 out of 7 of my counties were placed in states of emergency. My region faced similar devastation and had similar geographical features and similar socioeconomic conditions. Throughout my experience with Irene and Lee, I developed an understanding of how complicated it can be for areas to recover, and I learned that the more disadvantaged the community, the slower and more painful the recovery.

IRMA, MARIA AND THE CARIBBEAN:

Let me turn to EPA's effort in Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands. I traveled to Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands the week of October 16. I was, of course, struck by the incredible destruction in the wake of the hurricanes, but I was also immensely impressed with the resilience of the people. The focus of my trip was not to simply observe EPA's work, but also to strengthen relationships with Commonwealth, Territory and local officials and find solutions to pressing local problems. The experience was both sobering and galvanizing. I saw the incredible needs, and witnessed the urgency with which EPA and our other partners are working to meet these challenges.

A major challenge in the response and recovery efforts for Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands communities, as well as for the responding agencies, remains the lack of electricity. Virtually everything relies on electricity, including drinking water and wastewater systems, pollution controls and treatment systems at Superfund sites. Generators have provided an alternative power source, but are not a reliable long term solution, as they require fuel and experience mechanical failures. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, FEMA and the Commonwealth and Territory governments are working hard to tackle the electricity issue, and I applaud their efforts amid the extraordinary complications presented by the island setting and the age and condition of the power plants electrical grids. I encourage the continued support of these agencies as they make progress in this very difficult arena so that EPA and our partners can better assist communities in their recovery efforts.

EPA Region 2 has about 325 employees and contractors involved in the response, with about 230 on the ground in Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands. The following is the status

report as of November 11, 2017, resulting from our work with the governments of Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands, as well as with our many federal partners:

- In Puerto Rico, 20 of 115 drinking water plants are out of service;
- EPA has helped assess all 237 independent smaller rural community drinking water systems not operated by PRASA. Where systems need repair, the EPA is working with FEMA, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and local NGOs to help get the needed repairs, and in some cases to install solar power to these systems;
- In the U.S. Virgin Islands, EPA has taken well over 1000 drinking water samples. This information is being used to determine where disinfection of systems is needed. EPA is offering assistance to VI officials to support follow up visits to those sites that have been impacted;
- We have completed about 340 assessments of facilities covered by hazardous waste, risk management, and spill prevention regulations. Of these assessments, 253 are in Puerto Rico and 86 in the U.S. Virgin Islands. While there was damage at some of these facilities, there were no major releases or spills reported;
- EPA has conducted about 266 wastewater treatment assessments, including plants, pump stations and trunk lines. Of these, 233 were in Puerto Rico and 33 in the U.S. Virgin Islands;
- In Puerto Rico, 4 of the 51 wastewater treatment plants operated by PRASA are out of service. Of the 800 pump stations in Puerto Rico, about 106 are overflowing sewage due to lack of power, malfunctioning generators or damage;

- Many of the USVI wastewater plants on St. Thomas, St. Croix and St. John are operating, though some plants and pump stations are damaged or blocked by storm debris;
- EPA has assessed all 36Superfund and oil sites and has not found major spills or releases, though some sites do have damage;
- EPA is working with local jurisdictions and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to collect hazardous debris – household hazardous waste, white goods (i.e., heavy consumer durables such as for example, air conditioners, refrigerators, and stoves), electronics, as well as orphaned containers found in some communities. EPA has already collected more than 7,400 small containers, drums, and tanks in Puerto Rico and U.S. Virgin Islands;
- We are also coordinating with Puerto Rico, the U.S. Virgin Islands and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to handle other, often comingled debris. Where vegetative debris is concerned, we are working to support composting efforts and will be providing fine particle monitoring where local and state officials choose to burn woody debris using special devices;
- EPA is working closely with the U.S. Coast Guard as they address the nearly 800 sunken vessels and the resulting debris and small oil spills.

CHALLENGES:

We have made great progress, but have much work ahead of us, and face a few serious challenges in addition to the overarching concern of providing electricity across Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands:

- Due to the lack of power from the utilities in both Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands, there continues to be a need for a large number of generators. To help address this need, the EPA has issued some exceptions from current legal requirements to allow additional generators and fuel supplies to be used in Puerto Rico and U.S. Virgin Islands.
    - In addition of other forms of waste, medical waste had been building up due to logistical limitations with the specialized shipping containers needed to move medical waste from the islands to the mainland for disposal. In the U.S. Virgin Islands, EPA is addressing this potential public health threat and has so far collected approximately six tons of stockpiled medical waste from the Gov. Juan F. Luis Hospital and Medical Center on St. Croix and 29 tons of medical waste from the Schneider Regional Medical Center. We are in discussion with the government of Puerto Rico to offer them the same type of assistance.
- Many roads are still impassable and there are dangerous mud and rock slides in mountainous regions. EPA is providing important information to FEMA where we encounter blocked road, and we are helping make connections to fix problems presented by road and bridge outages. For example, a bridge to a sewage treatment plant in Utuado, Puerto Rico was destroyed, making it impossible to access the plant or fixed the broken trunk line connected to that plant. EPA coordinated with the Puerto Government and FEMA to advance the issue as a priority. PRASA currently has a contractor on site constructing a temporary bridge and installing a temporary trunk sewer.

- There is a need for ongoing humanitarian aid. In some cases, EPA has stepped out of its traditional role, coordinating closely with FEMA to bring water, food and supplies to more remote areas where we are conducting assessments and where our responders have been the first to arrive.

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE:

EPA continues to actively and thoughtfully respond to the devastation of Maria and Irma. As required, we will participate in the Federal government's after-action report and include a detailed description of strategies for more effectively responding to future storm events.

One critical lesson learned so far is that there are unique challenges for both emergency response and future hazard mitigation on the Caribbean islands. For example, there were not enough generators available on the islands to provide back-up electrical power needed for essential services such as drinking water, hospitals, labs, and wastewater collection and treatment. In Puerto Rico, this resulted in much of the population losing access to safe drinking water, widespread sewer overflows that contaminated surface waters and posed risks to the health of people who were drinking from or bathing in surface waters i.e., streams, rivers, lakes, and reservoirs.

I am extremely proud of the work that EPA is doing in response to all three hurricanes, but I am also mindful that there are always opportunities for improvement. We look forward to working with Congress and our federal and local partners to explore how our agency can more effectively respond during and following natural disasters. These collaborative efforts will enable all of us to better safeguard the health and safety of the public while protecting our natural resources to the best of our ability. Thank you again for the opportunity to testify today and I

look forward to any questions the committee might have on EPA's important role in emergency response and recovery efforts.