

**Testimony of
Peter D. Lopez, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency
Region 2, Regional Administrator**

**Before the U.S. House of Representatives Transportation and Infrastructure
Committee**

November 2, 2017

Good morning Mr. Chairman and fellow Transportation and Infrastructure Committee members, I am Pete Lopez, Regional Administrator for EPA's Region 2, which covers New Jersey, New York, Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands. Thank you for the privilege of joining you today for this important conversation. While I can only speak directly about EPA's response to the devastating impacts of Irma and Maria in Region 2, I will first briefly highlight EPA's overall efforts in response to Harvey, Irma and Maria.

HIGHLIGHTS:

In response to Hurricanes Harvey, Irma and Maria, EPA has assessed more than 5,000 drinking water systems and nearly 1,200 wastewater systems, including 100% of Texas and Florida systems. We have assessed nearly 250 National Priorities List, EPA removal and oil sites. We have assessed more than 1,400 regulated facilities, recovered more than 1,500 containers, drums and tanks, and

worked with the U.S. Coast Guard to address oil and hazardous materials released from more than 1,800 sunken vessels. We were able to pre-deploy our emergency response special teams and mobile assets to quickly conduct real-time analysis to assist with determining sources of threats to human health. To minimize or prevent disruptions with the supply of diesel fuel for mobile non-road generators and pumps used for emergency purposes, the EPA also waived the diesel requirements in the hurricane affected areas.

The EPA continues its round-the-clock response to Hurricanes Maria and Irma in close coordination with federal, state, territory, and local partners. EPA remains focused on environmental impacts and potential threats to human health as well as the safety of those in the affected areas. The EPA has largely transitioned away from round-the-clock response to aftermath recovery on Hurricane Harvey.

Working together, the EPA continues to coordinate recovery efforts with local, state and federal officials to address the human health and environmental impacts of Hurricane Harvey and its aftermath, especially the water systems in the affected areas.

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 a double punch from Hurricane Irene and Tropical Storm Lee. In that storm, 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 (i.e. mountainous terrain) and had similar socioeconomic conditions (northern Appalachia). Throughout my experience with Irene and Lee, I developed an understanding of how complicated it can be for areas to recover, and I learned firsthand 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 in both Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands. 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.

Clearly, the major obstacle for Puerto Rico and U.S. Virgin Islands communities, as well as the responding agencies, has been the lack of electricity. While I know the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, FEMA and the Commonwealth and Territory governments are working hard to tackle this problem, the lack of electricity has dramatically slowed down the pace and greatly complicated our collective response.

EPA Region 2 has about 300 employees and contractors involved in the response, with nearly 200 on the ground in Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands.

The following is the status report as of October 30, 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:

- EPA has conducted about 250 wastewater treatment assessments, including plants, pump stations and trunk lines.
- In Puerto Rico, 9 of the 51 wastewater treatment plants operated by PRASA are out of service. Of the 800 pump stations in Puerto Rico, about 150 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.
- In Puerto Rico, 25 of 115 drinking water plants are out of service. EPA has assessed approximately 237 independent smaller rural systems not operated by PRASA, where they were accessible. We continue to work toward gaining access to the remaining systems, which may be inaccessible as a result of road/bridge damage and/or are located in mountainous and more isolated regions of the Island.
- In the U.S. Virgin Islands, EPA has taken over 700 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 320 assessments of facilities covered by hazardous waste, risk management, and spill prevention regulations. While there was damage at some of these facilities, there were no major releases or spills reported.
- EPA has assessed 34 of about 35 Superfund and oil sites. The Culebra site is a DOD lead, and they are addressing that site.

- EPA is working with local jurisdictions and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to begin collecting hazardous debris – household hazardous waste, white goods (i.e., heavy consumer durables such as for example, air conditioners, refrigerators, and stoves) and electronics. 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 real-time 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 deal with the approximately 726 sunken vessels and the resulting debris and widespread small oil spills.

CHALLENGES:

We have much work ahead of us, and face a number of serious challenges:

- Many roads are still impassable and there are dangerous mud and rock slides in mountainous regions.
- 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.

- Initially, travel and lodging limitations impacted our ability to accommodate responders on the islands. These limitations are now subsiding.
- We are struggling with delays and continue to work closely with FEMA to transport heavy equipment to Puerto Rico via barge.

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 this and other Congressional Committees and federal 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.