

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

October 27, 2017

The Honorable Scott Pruitt
Administrator
Environmental Protection Agency
Ariel Rios Federal Building
1200 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Room 3000
Washington, DC 20460

The Honorable William B. Long
Administrator
Federal Emergency Management Agency
500 C. Street, SW
Washington, DC 20472

Lieutenant General Todd T. Semonite
Commanding General and Chief of Engineers
U.S. Army Corps of Engineers
441 G. Street, NW
Washington, DC 20314

Dear Administrator Pruitt, Administrator Long, and General Semonite,

It has been over five weeks since Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands experienced the catastrophic winds and waters of Hurricanes Irma and Maria. As communities work to rebuild with the help of the federal government, the vast destruction of structures across the islands have resulted in an enormous amount of waste and debris. Recent reports indicate that vast piles of trash consisting of destroyed building materials, appliances, couches, personal belongings, and other ruined property are building up along streets waiting to be removed.¹ As members of the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee, which has jurisdiction over waste management and regulatory oversight, we are requesting that your agencies update us on the cleanup of the debris and plans for future waste remediation.

The removal of debris from the islands will be a challenging endeavor. While some communities recently began receiving help with removing waste, the latest Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) update indicates that the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers estimates that roughly 90 percent of the debris from Hurricane Maria has yet to

¹ <http://www.cnn.com/videos/world/2017/10/23/puerto-rico-hurricane-debris-trash-cleanup-sandoval-pkg.cnn>

be cleared from Puerto Rico.² As the waste piles across the islands are further exposed to the elements, they become hosts to pests such as rodents and mosquitos, creating another health concern for residents of Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands.³

The issue of debris removal is compounded by the enduring waste management problems faced by the islands. Puerto Rico has approximately 29 landfills in operation, of which the majority were beyond capacity prior to Hurricane Maria. This causes an immediate problem for the disposal of debris. Furthermore, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) had previously scheduled 12 of the landfills for closure as they posed a threat to the environment and public health.⁴

One such landfill in Toa Alta, just to the west of San Juan, was scheduled to close by the end of 2017. An April 12, 2017, EPA news release stated that violations at the landfill presented an “imminent threat to the community.”⁵ That threat was due to liquid from decomposed waste potentially leaking into the aquifer system on the north coast of the island. It is highly likely that the devastating winds and rains from Hurricane Maria disturbed normal operations at the Toa Alta landfill and other landfills across the island.

The federal government has an obligation to protect the health and welfare of our fellow Americans in Puerto Rico. The potential environmental and health impacts of waste management problems on the islands were of concern even before Hurricane Maria. It is now imperative that the federal government address the issues of removing debris, assessing the damages incurred by landfills, and taking immediate steps to protect the public where there are risks of hazardous human exposure. As the problems of debris and waste management are coupled on the island, we write to ask you for the following information:

- 1) What progress has been made to date removing debris from communities across the islands? In particular, how have those efforts differed between urban and rural areas, especially in remote rural areas?
- 2) What plans have been made to handle the remaining debris that still requires clearing and removal? Please include budget estimates for these plans, as well as estimates for any alternatives which have been considered?

² FEMA DR-4339-PR Congressional Affairs Advisory, October 24, 2017

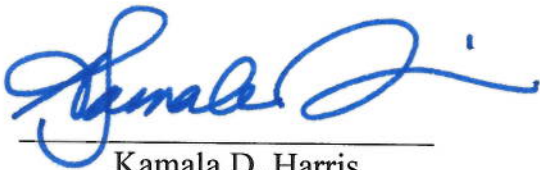
³ <http://www.miamiherald.com/news/nation-world/world/americas/article178702921.html>

⁴ https://www.epa.gov/sites/production/files/2016-09/documents/puerto_rico_landfills_fact_sheet_final_0.pdf

⁵ <https://www.epa.gov/newsreleases/epa-orders-operators-toa-altas-landfill-make-environmental-improvements-and-stop>

- 3) What protocols are currently in place regarding the identification, separation, and disposal of hazardous vs non-hazardous waste streams?
- 4) Have the condition of the islands' landfills been assessed following the hurricanes? What were the results of those assessments?
- 5) Have any emergency response actions been taken at these landfills as a result of those assessments? If so, please provide detailed information including the date, location, the nature of the threat posed, the emergency response action taken, and any ongoing monitoring activities at these sites.
- 6) Were impacted communities notified of the risks? If so, please provide detailed information regarding the method and content of these notifications.
- 7) How is EPA assisting Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands' with their long-term waste management challenges, including managing existing landfills, future waste disposal needs, and the previously ordered closure of specific landfills?

Thank you for your timely response to these questions. We hope to hear from your offices within the next two weeks. The proper handling of waste will be essential in the health and safety of our fellow Americans as we work to help rebuild Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands.



Kamala D. Harris
United States Senator

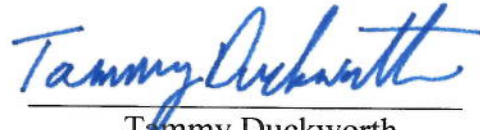
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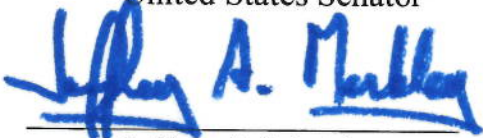
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