

Committee on Natural Resources
1324 Longworth House Office Building
May 15, 2019
10:00 a.m.

Oversight Hearing on
“U.S. Department of the Interior Budget and Policy Priorities for FY 2020.”

Questions from Rep. Jenniffer González-Colón (PR – At Large) for the Honorable David Bernhardt, Secretary, U.S. Department of the Interior

1. The U.S. Department of the Interior has an important presence in Puerto Rico. The National Park Service administers the San Juan National Historic Site, a world heritage site that includes important 16th century fortifications from the Spanish colonial era, including Forts San Cristóbal, San Felipe del Morro, and San Juan de la Cruz, in addition to three-quarters the city walls surrounding Old San Juan.

San Juan National Historic Site is vital to Puerto Rico’s economy. In 2016 alone, more than 1.4 million people visited the park, spurring more than \$85 million in revenue. As Puerto Rico’s sole representative in Congress, I am committed to ensuring the Department and the National Park Service have the necessary resources to protect and conserve this cultural treasure.

An important part of this effort must be addressing the park’s deferred maintenance backlog, which in FY2018 totaled over \$40.1 million. This figure represents an increase of over \$12.2 million from FY2017.

What actions has the Department taken to date to address the deferred maintenance backlog in the San Juan National Historic Site? How does the FY 2020 budget request seek to alleviate or solve this issue across this and other National Park Service units?

2. During the Natural Resources Full Committee hearing, you mentioned that you would be signing an order to allow the use of recreational fees to address certain employees, including the masons at the San Juan National Historic Site.

Could you elaborate on this proposal? How would it specifically impact the masonry program at the San Juan National Historic Site?

3. The Department of the Interior’s presence in Puerto Rico is also seen through the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, which administers 5 National Wildlife Refuges on the Island: the Desecheo, Laguna Cartagena, Cabo Rojo, Culebra, and Vieques National Wildlife Refuges.

Could your office provide this Committee a detailed breakdown of the total cost of deferred maintenance projects across the five National Wildlife Refuges in Puerto Rico and how the Department intends to address the backlog in each of them?

4. Addressing the National Wildlife Refuge System's deferred maintenance backlog is particularly important to the island-municipalities of Vieques and Culebra, where two of Puerto Rico's National Wildlife Refuges are located.

The Vieques National Wildlife Refuge is a former U.S. Navy Weapons Training Base that was actively used for more than 60 years. When the US Navy left the island of Vieques in the early 2000s, thousands of unexploded ordnance (UXO), munition related debris, and several dump sites were left behind. The Navy has been conducting environmental cleanup efforts ever since. Although much progress has been made, a major portion of the eastern refuge is still closed due to the danger of unexploded ordnance and the cleanup process occurring in that area.

In a December 2018 report to Congress, the U.S. Department of the Navy stated that land and water cleanup efforts in Vieques would be completed between 2031 and 2032, respectively.

What actions does the Department of the Interior intend to take to help the Department of Defense and local authorities expedite the cleanup process in Vieques and Culebra, where applicable? What efforts are currently being pursued to ensure the National Wildlife Refuges contribute to the islands' local economies?

5. In 2009, Congress authorized the Department of the Interior to conduct a special resource study to determine whether Fort San Gerónimo, which is on the eastern side of Old San Juan, should be added to the San Juan National Historic Site.

Could you provide an update on the status of this study and when the Department, and specifically the National Park Service, expects to finalize and publish its findings? I note that it has been 10 years since Congress authorized this study and it is urgent that we explore every avenue to protect this fortification.

6. Many of the Department of the Interior's facilities in Puerto Rico were severely impacted by Hurricanes Irma and Maria in 2017. What is the status of the rebuilding process across the Department's units on the Island? What efforts have been pursued, to date, to address the damage? What challenges, if any, has the Department encountered throughout the process and how can Congress assist in addressing them?