

Statement on H.R. 229 – the 9/11 style commission to investigate federal response  
to Hurricane Maria  
Transportation and Infrastructure Committee Member Day  
May 1, 2019, 10:00 a.m.

Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify about a very important piece of oversight legislation – H.R. 229, a bill to create a “9/11-style” commission to investigate the federal response to the aftermath of Hurricane Maria.

As you all know, Hurricane Maria devastated Puerto Rico. It took more than two years to fully restore power, telecommunications services, and potable water. These services remain spotty in many areas.

The island suffered over \$90 billion in damage, and an estimated 3,000 people lost their lives – far exceeding the official numbers reported by the local and federal governments at the time.

My legislation, H.R. 229, would create a non-partisan commission to look at how the administration's response to this disaster was shaped by the artificially low death toll. It would also examine the adequacy of the steps taken by the federal government to prepare for the hurricanes, and what went wrong with the federal response in the weeks after the storms made landfall.

Equally as important, the Commission would be tasked with examining any potential disparities in the federal response to Puerto Rico compared with 2017 Mainland disasters. As we have seen, the response in Puerto Rico was slower and less effective than in places like Texas after Hurricane Harvey. Compounding a lackluster federal response was a series of botched FEMA contracts that delayed delivery of crucial supplies such as tarps and meals.

Frustratingly, the Puerto Rican government continues to fight with FEMA for adequate funding to repair or replace damaged hospitals, schools, and infrastructure.

It is critical that we get answers to why this administration keeps moving the goal posts on permanent work projects, while the communities of Puerto Rico continue to suffer nearly 2 and a half years later.

Thousands of our fellow American citizens perished in this catastrophe. We need an independent, nonpartisan panel to fully investigate and bring to light all the facts.

We also need recommendations on ways to prevent such a humanitarian catastrophe from happening again on American soil.

I'm confident that H.R. 229 will provide the forum and the opportunity to get to the bottom of reasons for the abject failure of the federal response to the 2017 natural disasters in Puerto Rico.

Thank you.