

Opening Statement
Ranking Member Stacey Plaskett
Hearing on “Examining Environmental Barriers to Infrastructure Development”
March 1, 2017

Mr. Chairman, thank you for calling today’s hearing concerning barriers to infrastructure development.

More than most places, the U.S. Virgin Islands understands the importance of striking the balance between environmental regulation and development.

The Virgin Islands are home to just under 107,000 people. With a cost of living 33 percent higher than D.C.’s cost of living, every dollar in the local economy is crucial to the survival of the citizens of the Virgin Islands. This is why we cannot afford drawn out delays in permitting for economic development projects.

There are many projects in the Virgin Islands that have been subject to numerous delays through the federal permitting process. One of those projects has been ongoing for the last 10 years with no final decision. A draft biological opinion was issued, but it has been 18 months since the last correspondence to address the findings in the opinion. This is completely unacceptable.

Tourism is the primary industry for the islands. Tourism and travel, including the effects from investment, account for about 30% of the islands’ GDP. Nearly 3 million tourists come to the islands every year.

Many of those tourists come to the Virgin Islands to enjoy our beautiful beaches and dive to see the coral. We understand that protecting these natural resources and species is crucial to the islands’ economy.

And we also understand that protecting the environment can add time and expense to the completion of a project that will employ our citizens.

We must find an appropriate balance.

One of the primary problems to moving projects out of environmental review has been inadequate staffing at National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration or NOAA, the federal agency that handles projects having an impact on coral. There simply are not enough staff to do the consultations that would allow permitting.

Currently, the southeast region of the United States is one of the fastest growing regions in the country. Despite that fact, NOAA only has 14 full time employees handling endangered species related consulting. The West Coast has 150 full time employees doing the same consultations.

The Governor of the Virgin Islands wrote the White House back in August about excessive delays to a hotel being built on St. Croix. We have been raising the alarm from the islands for a while now.

But under President Trump, the problem will be exacerbated. President Trump declared a hiring freeze, so there will be no hiring in permitting agencies that are already understaffed. President Trump has also announced that he will cut budgets in agencies needed for economic development. The hiring freeze and the budget cuts to come will hurt infrastructure development in the future.

I speak for the Virgin Islands regardless of who is in the White House. President Trump has to understand that the hiring freeze is going to bring development in the Virgin Islands and the whole southeast region of the United States to a screeching halt.

I hope today we can discuss some sensible solutions to these issues. Thank you.

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