

# Congress of the United States

## House of Representatives

COMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT AND GOVERNMENT REFORM

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### Opening Statement Ranking Member Stacey Plaskett

#### Hearing on “Examining the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers” Subcommittee on the Interior, Energy, and Environment

March 6, 2018

Mr. Chairman, thank you for calling this important hearing regarding the work of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. I also would like to thank the witnesses from the Army Corps and local organizations, who will provide valuable insights and ideas.

The Army Corps performs a very important role throughout our country, from issuing permits that balance economic development and environmental protection to assisting with the federal government’s response to natural disasters.

This past fall, the 103,000 American citizens living in the U.S. Virgin Islands were hit by two devastating hurricanes, Irma and Maria. Today, they are still struggling to recover.

Unfortunately, the Army Corps has been extremely slow in assisting with this recovery.

First, the Army Corps was responsible for overseeing the removal of one million cubic yards of debris from the islands of St. Thomas and St. John. I have heard serious concerns from my constituents that the Army Corps has acted much more slowly than the local Department of Public Works, which completed debris removal on St. Croix.

Second, the Army Corps has been staggeringly slow in installing blue tarp roofs on houses that were seriously damaged by the hurricanes. According to reporting in the St. Croix Source, weeks after the hurricanes devastated the Virgin Islands, the Army Corps had only installed 282 of these temporary roofs.

The U.S. Virgin Islands is unfortunately accustomed to the slow pace of assistance from the Army Corps. For seven years, Coral World Ocean Park on St. Thomas waited for the Army Corps to conclude the Section 404 permitting process in order for the park to obtain the permit it needed to continue with an expansion project that would “enhance tourism.” This delay nearly caused the project to be abandoned. Such a set back by Coral World Ocean Park would have been truly devastating given that the park is a major tourist attraction that employs local Virgin Islanders at a time where Virgin Islanders are working hard to get back on their feet.

But let's be clear – I am not questioning the dedication of the hardworking people of the Army Corps. I believe you all are doing what you can to serve the American people. What I **am** questioning is whether the Corps is hurting from being significantly understaffed and underfunded. And I would like to know what we – not as Democrats, not as Republicans, but as Members of Congress can do to help.

Today we need to have an important discussion. We need to hear what the Army Corps will do differently in the future to address challenges. We need to hear from the Army Corps what it needs from Congress in order to work better for the American people. Through oversight and accountability, hearings like these will cause the Army Corps to serve the American people with the speed and effectiveness they deserve.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

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