

U.S. House of Representatives
Committee on Natural Resources
Washington, DC 20515

December 9, 2020

President-Elect Joseph R. Biden
Presidential Transition Team
Washington, DC 20230

Dear President-Elect Biden:

On behalf of the U.S. House Committee on Natural Resources, we congratulate you on your election as 46th President of the United States. We also offer Senator Kamala Harris our heartfelt congratulations on her election as the next Vice President.

The Committee on Natural Resources is the lead committee of the U.S. House of Representatives on matters related to U.S. Territories. We thank you and Vice-President-Elect Harris for developing the *Biden-Harris Plan for Recovery, Renewal and Respect for Puerto Rico*. The residents of the island have been impacted by an ongoing fiscal crisis and economic depression, major hurricanes and earthquakes, and the COVID-19 pandemic. We write to underscore the importance of the new administration addressing the needs of the 3.2 million U.S. citizens living in Puerto Rico and to respectfully request a rapid implementation of the Biden-Harris priorities for the island.

Accordingly, we look forward to working with you on the matters listed below, most of which are described in the Biden-Harris plan for Puerto Rico in more detail.

- 1. Creating a federal working group for Puerto Rico that reports directly to the President.** Executive orders 13183 and 13517 establish the President's Task Force on Puerto Rico's Status and its duties. Among the responsibilities of the Task Force are ensuring official attention to Puerto Rico's political status and providing advice to the President and the Congress on policies and initiatives that promote job creation, education, health care, clean energy, and economic development on the island.

We recommend creating a federal working group for Puerto Rico as quickly as possible and assigning full-time staff to support its work. Also, expanding the responsibilities of the working group to include providing advice to the President and the Congress on policies and initiatives for Puerto Rico's fiscal recovery and disaster reconstruction. This would provide much-needed Executive leadership on timely federal initiatives.

- 2. Addressing the issue of Puerto Rico's political status.** For decades, Puerto Ricans have been considering different political status alternatives to the present territorial status with the United States. A future of renewal and respect is not possible without addressing the issue of Puerto Rico's political status.

- 3. Supporting a full recovery and infrastructure reconstruction to modern standards.** Puerto Rico was impacted by Hurricanes Irma and Maria and earthquakes that inflicted grave damage to its infrastructure and economy. The federal response has been ineffective and slow, limiting the island's long-term recovery. With adequate federal policies, Puerto Rico can invest to rebuild its infrastructure and increase its resiliency to withstand future natural disasters.
- 4. Investing in Puerto Rico's future through economic development initiatives and support for families.** Puerto Rico has been experiencing an economic crisis for more than a decade; poverty and unemployment rates are much higher in the U.S. Territory compared to the States. Existing federal policies hamper Puerto Rico's economic growth. With appropriate federal policies, Puerto Rico can develop a healthy and self-sufficient economy, and improve the quality of life of the residents of the island.
- 5. Providing relief from unsustainable debt.** In 2015, the Government of Puerto Rico announced that it could not pay approximately \$72 billion in debts. The Puerto Rico Oversight, Management, and Economic Stability Act (PROMESA) of 2016 aimed to address this fiscal crisis. Considering the major natural disasters that have affected the island and the COVID-19 pandemic, the implementation of PROMESA needs a meaningful shift in approach to protect essential public services and pensions and reduce the island's unsustainable public debt burden.
- 6. Expanding access to education and workforce development.** More than half of children on the island live below the federal poverty line and Puerto Rico is the jurisdiction with the highest percentage of students receiving special education services. In addition, public schools on the island have been damaged by major natural disasters. The Federal government can increase investments in students and public schools in Puerto Rico to expand access to high-quality public education, ensure individual career services, and invest in public school infrastructure.
- 7. Requesting the Solicitor General to support granting the residents of Puerto Rico access to Supplemental Security Income (SSI).** Earlier this year, in *United States v. Vaello-Madero*, the U.S. Court of Appeals for the First Circuit declared unconstitutional the exclusion of U.S. citizens residing in Puerto Rico from SSI. Regrettably, President Donald Trump filed a certiorari petition seeking to revoke the Court of Appeals' decision, which is pending before the U.S. Supreme Court. Including eligible residents of Puerto Rico in SSI would benefit approximately 300,000 individuals on the island.

The U.S. House Committee on Natural Resources' Members and staff are committed to championing policies and legislation related to these priorities for the benefit of the residents of Puerto Rico. We look forward to partnering with you and Vice-President-Elect Harris to advance the *Biden-Harris Plan for Recovery, Renewal and Respect for Puerto Rico*. The new Biden-Harris administration represents a unique opportunity for the Federal government to demonstrate to the people of Puerto Rico that they deserve to be treated with dignity and an equal chance to get ahead.

Please contact Margarita Varela-Rosa with the Committee's Office of Insular Affairs at Margarita.Varela-Rosa@mail.house.gov or (202) 748-2828 if you have any questions or would like to discuss this information in more detail.

Thank you for your attention to this matter.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Raúl M. Grijalva". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, stylized "R" and "G".

RAÚL M. GRIJALVA
Chair
Committee on Natural Resources