

**Chairman Joe Manchin's Opening Statement**  
**Thursday, February 9, 2023**  
**Full Committee Hearing on the U.S. Territories**

**Introduction**

- The committee will come to order.
  
- Today we're here both for a very quick vote and to discuss the state of the U.S. territories.
  
- Speaking first to the markup, on the agenda is an amendment to our Committee rules for the 118<sup>th</sup> Congress and the Committee's funding resolution for the 118<sup>th</sup> Congress.
  
- The rule change will reduce the number of Senators who need to be physically present to report matters from the Committee from 11 to 10, in keeping with the reduction in the total number of our members from 20 to 19.
  
- The funding resolution is something the Rules of the Senate require us to report to fund the Committee's operating expenses for the next two years.
  
- The spending levels in the resolution have been preapproved and given to us by the Rules Committee and will be bundled with those of other committees and approved by the Senate later this month.

- I know several Committees are planning to do the same this morning so our members have competing schedules, so I'd propose that as soon as we have a reporting quorum we quickly pause to vote. Would that work for you, Senator Barrasso?
- Now, turning to the hearing today, I would like to extend a warm welcome to the territorial governors who are all joining us in person:
  - **Governor Bryan** of the U.S. Virgin Islands
  - **Governor Guerrero** of Guam
  - **Governor Lemanu** of American Samoa
  - **Governor Palacios** of the Northern Mariana Islands
  - **Governor Pierluisi** of Puerto Rico
- I know it is not an easy trip to make but I appreciate having you all here in person today.
- As many of my colleagues know, this Committee has long-standing jurisdiction of territorial policy and insular affairs and I look forward to learning about the opportunities and challenges facing your communities.
- I would like to start by acknowledging that American Samoa, Guam, the Northern Mariana Islands, Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin

Islands are an integral part of the history, economy and culture of the United States, and that each territory is unique with its own set of pressing issues and priorities.

## **National Security**

- This past year, the world has seen heightened geopolitical tensions following Putin's invasion of Ukraine.
- I am also concerned about the Chinese Communist Party's malicious influence and predatory economic policies leading to potential for conflict in the Pacific, as I am sure the people of Guam, American Samoa, and the Northern Mariana Islands are as well.
- We must not turn a blind eye to the severe consequences of China's continued aggression toward Taiwan, and the Indo-Pacific region at large.
- The territories and the freely associated states in the Pacific are a vital part of our national security.
- Guam has long hosted American military bases.
- And, American Samoa yields the highest rate of military enlistment of any U.S. state or territory.
- As we face these global challenges, the United States cannot ignore the concern of the territories and must prioritize maintaining peace and security in the region.

## **Pandemic and Natural Disaster Recovery**

- There are many challenges facing the territories today.
- I do not need to remind any of you about the impact that the global pandemic has had on our communities and our economies.
- The pandemic's challenges were compounded in the territories given the ongoing recovery from the devastating natural disasters in both the Caribbean and the Pacific.
- I applaud each government for quickly and effectively responding to the pandemic and prioritizing power and water restoration in the wake of these natural disasters.
- Now, however, we are turning a new page and focusing on economic recovery and how best to move forward.

## **Puerto Rico Grid Recovery**

- In Puerto Rico, this recovery is powered by a reliable and affordable energy grid.
- It's clear that hurricanes will continue to deliver setbacks to grid reconstruction, as we saw with Hurricane Fiona last fall.
- But power restoration to the majority of the island in days or weeks is an improvement over months, as we saw after the 2017 hurricanes.

- I am frustrated by the slow progress, but am hopeful that the change in the operation and management of PREPA's generation and transmission assets will bring transparency, modernization, and cost savings.
- I look forward to hearing from you today about where that recovery stands.
- It's critical that investments made can deliver real benefits today and tomorrow and that there is the capacity on the ground to maintain this infrastructure going forward.

## **Conclusion**

- There are many, many pressing issues impacting the territories that we will discuss today, from workforce, infrastructure, inflation and supply chain difficulties to the different treatment of taxes and federal assistance programs.
- Underlying many of these challenges are questions of economic development and fiscal stability.
- Again, I'd like to thank each of you for your time today and sharing your priorities and discussing how Congress can support economic opportunity and improve the quality of life of individuals living and working in the territories for generations to come.
- As I've said before, the sun never sets on the jurisdiction of the Energy and Natural Resources Committee, and I would like to

recognize those who are watching this hearing from the territories in the Pacific, I know it is very early right now where some of you live.

- With that, I will turn it over to Senator Barrasso for his opening remarks.