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USVI Testifies on the Critical Need for Energy Diversification in Face of Congressional Division

Island representatives confront ideological splits over energy policy, advocating for a mix of sustainable sources

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V.I. Energy Office director, and V.I. Water and Power Authority board chair, Kyle Fleming.

On Thursday, representatives of the U.S. Virgin Islands went before the Indian and Insular Affairs Subcommittee of the U.S. House Committee on Natural Resources to testify on the ongoing and future impacts the Biden administration's energy policy is having on the territory. There, they met a Congressional body deeply divided on how the nation should address energy security in a changing world.

Kyle Fleming, director of the Virgin Islands Energy Office and chair of the Water and Power Authority's Governing Board, began his testimony by painting a picture of the USVI's energy picture: reliant on imported fossil fuels and required to maintain an expensive and marginally reliable transmission and distribution grid over a geographically complex territory.

According to Mr. Fleming, the solution to the challenges borne out of the territory's energy profile would be to harness plentiful renewable resources and simultaneously implement sensible energy storage solutions to provide stable, abundant power at low cost.

The Biden administration's energy policy aligns with local goals to reduce the territory's energy burden, and indicates "a shared territorial and federal commitment to a sustainable and resilient future," he said. Mr. Fleming told lawmakers how the additional federal dollars allocated under the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law had been put to use in the territory to fund energy incentives for residents, including rebates on purchases of electric vehicle and battery storage systems. He singled out as the most transformative an Environmental Protection Agency-administered "Solar For All" grant, which provided \$100 million for residential rooftop and community solar projects, along with connected battery storage.

Mr. Fleming ended his prepared testimony by praising the Biden administration for making the funding available for the territory to "define and implement our energy future through a modern-day lens."

Meanwhile, Gregory Guannel, director of the Green Caribbean Center at the University of the Virgin Islands, emphasized that the energy infrastructure of American territories is often an isolated grid "without the ability to tap into larger electricity markets when problems arise." As a result, costs are high, and a generation or transmission issue "turns into an outage or blackout that can last hours, days, sometimes weeks," he explained to lawmakers.

Despite the adaptations common to island life that are employed by many - gas stoves, dryers and water heaters, and the purchase of generators by those who can afford them, "our quality of life, economic competitiveness, and security is compromised by our fragile electrical infrastructure and unreliable, affordable access to fuel," Mr. Guannel said.

Mr. Guannel made the point that investing in decentralized sources of alternative power such as residential rooftop solar generation is a strategy that should be considered across the nation, not just in island territories. He referenced a recent outage in the north-east caused by stormy weather as an example of the challenges to energy supply being experienced across the U.S.

The reactions to the testimonies from committee members displayed the extent to which positions on energy are divided along ideological lines. Some lawmakers, including Douglas LaMalfa (R-CA 1st District), downplayed the threat of climate change and dismissed alternative energy sources as "weather-dependent" and "unreliable," going so far as to use the recent 4-minute eclipse as a potential reason to avoid emerging green energy technology.

Ranking member Leger Fernández (D-NM 3rd District), however, highlighted the testimonies of Mr. Fleming and Dr. Guannel, noting their passionate support of decentralizing energy production, and spoke on Mr. Fleming's championing of energy diversity even as the chair of a utility that generates revenue from the sale of electricity to consumers.

In response to a query from Congresswoman Fernández, both Mr. Fleming and Mr. Guannel underscored how critical it was for the Virgin Islands to utilize a diverse mix of energy sources. "Diversification is at the core of everything that we look at," said Mr. Fleming, while Mr. Guannel described why the realities of island life - including the innate vulnerabilities of the main

transmission grid – necessitate alternative or backup power.

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