

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Federal Agencies, PR And USVI Hosting Major Conference On Climate Change In The Caribbean

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This week, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, U.S. Department of Commerce's National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, U.S. Department of Agriculture's Forest Service, and the U.S. Department of Interior are joining forces with the Governments of Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands to host a conference on climate change in the Caribbean in San Juan, Puerto Rico, according to a joint press release issued late Monday. The conference began on Tuesday and will end today.

The conference features dignitaries and scientists from many Caribbean islands and the U.S. who will explore the consequences of climate change to the region. Participants will discuss the progress that has already been made to address climate change and the

need for further action, according to the release.

The objectives of the conference are to increase understanding of the “climate challenge” that exists in Puerto Rico, the US Virgin Islands, and the broader Caribbean. The conference will highlight recent success stories in preparing for and responding to the effects of climate variability and change in the Caribbean, review new advances in Caribbean climate science, promote tools and strategies that support climate adaptation and mitigation activities, and inspire further collaboration in responding to challenges of climate change in the Caribbean.

During the conference, a memorandum of understanding will be signed between the governments of Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands; EPA will also sign the document, which is geared at cementing a commitment to share expertise to address climate change in the Caribbean.

The conference is being held at the Inter-American University of Puerto Rico School of Law. Among the conference presenters over the two day period are Carlos Fuller, Caribbean Community Climate Change Centre, Belize; Jean Yves LA cascade, special advisor to the president, Territorial Diplomatic Mission; regional council of Martinique, Shawn-Michael Malone, Office of the Governor of the Virgin Islands; Alejandro De la Camp, Caribbean area director of the Federal Emergency Management Agency; Mona Barnes, director of the VI Emergency Management Agency; Augustin Carbo, chairman of the Puerto Rico Energy Commission, along with José Maeso, director of the Puerto Rico Energy Affairs Administration, and Johann Clendenin, chairman of the VI Public Service Commission.

Plenary sessions and panels during the conference will cover a wide range of topics, including:

- Challenges the Caribbean faces in addressing climate change;
- Implications of climate change to public health, infrastructure, water resources, and natural ecosystems;
- The need to enhance community and ecosystem resilience, promote sustainable development, preserve water resources, and protect ecosystems;
- How best to prepare for, manage risk from, and respond to disasters; and
- Climate mitigation and adaptation in the Caribbean, including in local communities.

“This conference reminds us of something very important when we talk about climate change: we are not alone in this fight. I think we can qualify it as the largest cooperative effort, until now, between the governments of the United States, Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands to prepare for the great challenges that climate change may bring. We have before us a historic opportunity to show the world how our islands can cope and grow in adversity. At the end of the day, many of the challenges are the same: droughts, hurricanes and coastal erosion recognizes no borders”, said Governor Alejandro García Padilla.

"I am pleased to join Governor Garcia Padilla, and key Federal agencies in this continued effort to achieve resilient communities in the face of present and increasing impacts of climate change in our respective jurisdictions. I am personally and morally committed to this challenge and deeply encouraged by the collaboration I see resulting in this very

important conference on climate change in the US Caribbean,” said Governor Kenneth E. Mapp. “I am confident that this conference will result in a broader awareness by our constituencies, stronger collaborations between Puerto Rico, the US Virgin Islands and our Federal partners in accomplishing the task of adapting to climate change. It is also my hope that this will be the beginning of other collaborations between the US Caribbean and the wider Caribbean. We all share the same climate, very similar economies and ways of life. Our climate challenges are synonymous.”

“The Caribbean is exceptionally vulnerable to climate change and other coastal hazards, which makes the task of safeguarding these communities and this environment all the more challenging,” said Russell Callender, Ph.D., acting assistant administrator for NOAA’s National Ocean Service. “This conference, with its emphasis on local successes and initiatives, provides another indication of the region’s willingness to be proactive and share with each other what is working and what can be improved.”

“Climate change is impacting the Caribbean in serious ways, and we can expect more impacts in the future,” said U.S. Environmental Protection Agency Regional Administrator Judith A. Enck. “This region is extremely vulnerable to sea level rise, extreme heat events, hurricanes, and drought. The fact that so many impressive thinkers and solution-makers from U.S. government agencies, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands, are in attendance shows that we all understand – we must act now and act together to address the greatest environmental challenge of our time.”

“Nothing could be more closely tied to climate than the food we eat and the flow of ecosystem services from our natural landscapes. Warming temperatures, increasing climate variability and changing climate extremes affect food security, sustainable resources and our well-being” said US Forest Service Research Ecologist William Gould. “The USDA plays a leading role in efforts to reduce organizational barriers to collaborative action on climate change”.

Two programs that seek to enhance collaboration among federal and territorial agencies are the USDA Caribbean Climate Hub and the Caribbean Landscape Conservation Cooperative, both located at the U.S. Forest Service International Institute of Tropical Forestry. They have been established to enhance the flow of information from climate science to agencies and individuals making decisions. These organizations are designed to harness the collective capacity of government agencies and partners to develop new science and get the best information in the hands of people and agencies who carry out climate adaptation and mitigation actions.

"At USDA-NRCS, we are working to provide the necessary tools, technical and financial assistance to our farmers so that they can adapt to the impacts of climate change in the Caribbean Area," said Edwin Almodóvar, NRCS Caribbean Area Director.

In June 2013, President Obama released his Climate Action Plan for the U.S. directing a wide range of U.S. agencies to take action to cut carbon pollution in the United States through regulations on vehicles and power plants; additionally, the president sought to prepare the U.S. for climate impacts and to put the U.S. in the lead on international efforts to address climate change.

For more information about the Climate Action Plan and actions already underway to implement the plan, visit <https://www.whitehouse.gov/climate-change>.

In 2014, NOAA administrator, Dr. Kathryn Sullivan, signed the NOAA Caribbean Strategy, which outlines the agency's mission priorities in the region. It focused on three goals: strengthen the understanding of, and adaptation to, a changing climate; enhanced multi-hazard monitoring, forecasting, and risk management; and improve conservation and management of ocean and coastal ecosystems and resources.

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