

The Virgin Islands Consortium

FCC Clears Path For Project Loon To Help Restore Wireless Service To PR And USVI

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Project Loon, a balloon-delivered internet project that started with Google and is now under Alphabet's (which owns Google) X "innovation lab" stable, may soon be helping Puerto Rico and U.S. Virgin Islands residents receive quality LTE cellular service and highspeed internet.

That's because Alphabet was given a temporary license (October 6 to April 4, 2018) by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) to operate Project Loon in the U.S. territories. The helium balloons are expected to be deployed in the islands, whose internet service following Hurricanes Irma and Maria has been intermittent at best. On Friday, William Vogel, federal coordinating officer of FEMA Region II, said 41 percent of

St. Thomas had cellphone coverage while 37 percent of St. Croix was covered. There is so far zero cellphone coverage on St. John.

“The purpose of the [Special Temporary Authority] is to support licensed mobile carriers’ restoration of limited communications capability in areas of Puerto Rico and the United States Virgin Islands affected by Hurricanes Irma and Maria,” the license reads.

Project Loon, part of Google's original "moonshot" efforts, was designed to bring connectivity to remote parts of the world and areas struggling with the aftermath of a natural disaster. In a statement issued to Engadget, a spokesperson for Alphabet's X lab said the team needs to work with a partner network of a local telecom to make it all work. “To deliver signal to people's devices, Loon needs be integrated with a telco partner's network — the balloons can't do it alone,” the spokesperson explains. “We've been making solid progress on this next step and would like to thank everyone who's been lending a hand.”

In Puerto Rico's case, the telecom network may be Telefonica, in the U.S. Virgin Islands' case it would be either AT&T, Sprint or Viya -- or all three.

Loon's deployment to the U.S. territories won't be the project's first rodeo; it has been tested over the years in multiple countries, including Brazil, New Zealand, Indonesia, Sri Lanka and France, among others.

Sources: [Engadget](#), [The Verge](#).