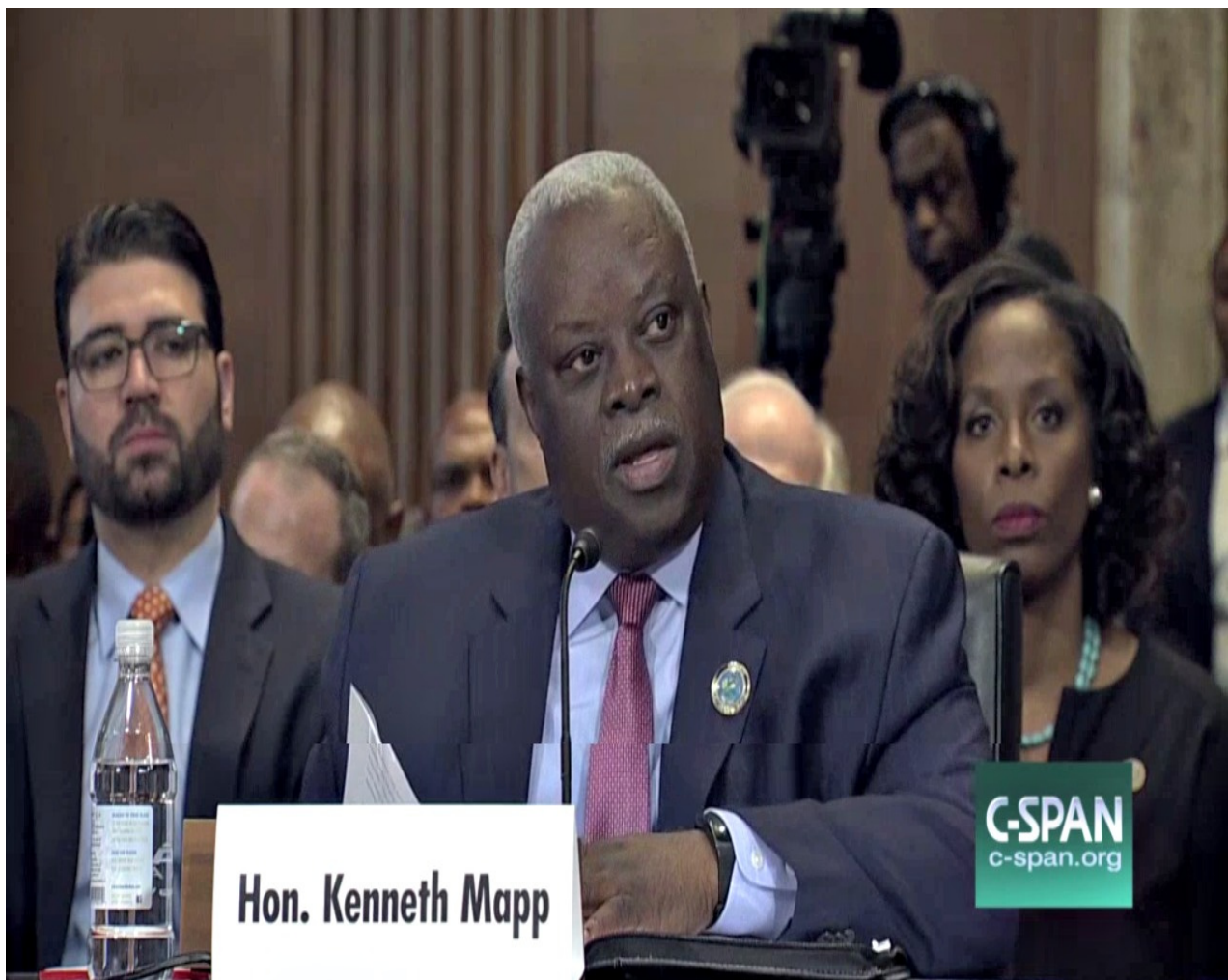


The Virgin Islands Consortium

Hope For USVI As U.S. Senators See 'Extraordinary Opportunity' To Rebuild Territory Sustainably After Storms

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Senators who make up the U.S. Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources, chaired by Alaska Republican Senator Lisa Murkowski, expressed on Tuesday following testimony from Governor Kenneth Mapp that they were willing to support the U.S. Virgin Islands with funding to rebuild infrastructure that would be resilient to future storms, which scientists have agreed will keep coming more frequently and with greater force because of global warming.

"I think this is an extraordinary opportunity for our country," said Senator Joe Manchin of West Virginia, speaking to the request by the territory's government to provide funding to build a power grid that would be able to withstand the battering of ferocious storms. He mentioned the rate that Virgin Islanders currently pay for electricity as 32 cent per kilowatt hour, which Mr. Manchin said is three times the national average. "We can't continue to do the same thing over and over," he said, referring to the five times that the U.S. government has spent hundreds of millions of dollars rebuilding the territory's power distribution system after storms.

Mr. Mapp's testimony on Tuesday was part of a hearing organized by the committee to gather information to determine how much funding the U.S. government should make available to the territories for rebuilding purposes. Ricardo Rosselló, Puerto Rico's governor, Julio Rhymer, the Virgin Islands Water and Power Authority's executive director, and Bruce Walker, assistant secretary for the Office of Electricity Delivery and Energy Reliability, were among others who testified at Tuesday's hearing.

The takeaway was that the U.S. lawmakers would like to see a sustainable plan moving forward, relative to rebuilding the islands. Whether the USVI would receive the \$7.5 billion it says it needs to recover, was not a certainty, but lawmakers gave encouraging signs for areas of most importance: Providing funding for the territory's hospitals damaged by the storms, including renewable energy, micro grids, and placing power lines underground in certain parts of the islands. In fact, most of the discussion centered around electricity, with senators appearing unsatisfied that most of the U.S. territories were still without power two months after the storms.

"We are the most powerful nation of earth. Should two months after these disasters that the people in Puerto Rico and some 70-80 percent of the people in the Virgin Islands still not have electricity?" asked Senator Bernie Sanders. Major General Donald E. Jackson, Jr., deputy commanding general for civil and emergency operations at the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE), said that USACE does not regularly perform the duties that its personnel were thrust into in the islands, and spoke of the bureaucracy and protocol that sometimes slow down the process of getting the necessary tools to speed up recovery. Mr. Sanders, pointing out that he was not criticizing Major Jackson or USACE's response to the disasters, added, "All that I'm saying, if somebody from Mars was looking down, this is the United States of America; two months later people on these islands are still living in misery. I think as a nation we could have done better."

Mr. Sanders also supported the idea of including more renewable energy into the islands' power distribution system moving forward. And he posed an important question to Mr. Mapp. He asked the governor if he had the freedom to move the way he wanted to in terms of utilizing renewable energy to power the territory, what percentage of the Virgin Islands would be on sustainable energy within ten years. The governor gave a general answer, stating that the territory has set a target of 30 percent by 2025, "and before the hurricanes hit we had one-third of that installed, so we want to put 21 percent more megawatts in wind, additional solar and then smaller power generating units with micro grids on the three islands."

Mr. Sanders rephrased the question: Would it be unrealistic to say that in 20 years you could be a hundred percent sustainable? Mr. Mapp responded, "I would not say that's unrealistic; hopefully I'll just live another 30 [years], and I'm hopeful by then we we'll be at

40 percent or 50 percent renewable."

During his testimony, which was cut short because of time, Mr. Mapp effectively relayed the struggles of Virgin Islanders after the storms, reminding lawmakers that two Category 5 hurricanes affected the USVI within 12 days. The governor said 15,000 homes were destroyed and, as of Tuesday, only 27 percent of the territory had been restored with power. "I came here before you to personally ask for your help," he said, listing the critical infrastructure -- schools, medical facilities, police stations, fire stations -- that had been ruined by Hurricanes Irma and Maria. "Simple things that we normally take for granted -- running water, a hot meal -- remain unavailable to many," Mr. Mapp said. He revealed the estimated loss to the economy over the course of three fiscal years to be \$1.7 billion.

"Recovery will take time," Mr. Mapp noted, before putting in his request for the \$7.5 billion. And he was sure to include the people of the territory in his testimony as resilient Americans.

Mr. Mapp said the funds would enable the USVI to regain normalcy and be better prepared for the future. With that line, the U.S. makers at the hearing all agreed. "I think we're all in agreement that it is insane to rebuild the way it was," Mr. Sanders said.