

**STATEMENT OF RANDY LAVASSEUR, CARIBBEAN GROUP
SUPERINTENDENT, NATIONAL PARK SERVICE, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF THE
INTERIOR, BEFORE THE HOUSE OVERSIGHT & GOVERNMENT REFORM
SUBCOMMITTEE ON INTERIOR, ENERGY, & ENVIRONMENT, REGARDING THE
HISTORIC 2017 HURRICANE SEASON: IMPACTS ON THE U.S. VIRGIN ISLANDS.**

March 12, 2018

Chairman Farenthold, Ranking Member Plaskett, and members of the Subcommittee, thank you for your invitation to present the Department of the Interior's views regarding the impacts on the U.S. Virgin Islands from the historic 2017 hurricane season. This testimony focuses on national park lands in the Virgin Islands.

The National Park Service (NPS) maintains a substantial presence in the U.S. Virgin Islands. NPS sites include Christiansted National Historic Site, Buck Island Reef National Monument, and Salt River Bay National Historical Park and Ecological Preserve on St. Croix; and Virgin Islands National Park and Virgin Islands Coral Reef National Monument on St. John. Together with our other Caribbean park, San Juan National Historic Site in Puerto Rico, these parks protect and preserve approximately 29,000 acres, including nearly 2,000 species and approximately 200 archeological sites and historic structures.

The NPS is keenly aware that tourism plays an enormous role in the economy of the U.S. Virgin Islands, and that the national parks of the U.S. Virgin Islands are an integral part of this tourism economy. Nearly 600,000 people visited the national parks of the U.S. Virgin Islands in 2016, supporting nearly 1,000 jobs and about \$100 million dollars in economic output within their gateway communities.

Hurricanes Irma and Maria dealt a devastating blow to the Caribbean in 2017. The people, land and resources, including areas managed by the NPS, were significantly impacted. On September 6, 2017, Hurricane Irma, a Category 5 storm with winds reaching 185 miles per hour, caused extensive damage to Virgin Islands National Park, which comprises 73% of St. John. Within two weeks, Hurricane Maria, a Category 4 storm, with winds topping out at 155 miles per hour, moved across the U.S. Virgin Islands, leaving St. John and St. Thomas without power.

On St. John, the storms displaced a dozen NPS staff members and destroyed or significantly damaged 25 NPS facilities, including the island's oldest building, erected in the 1600s. The storms substantially eroded shorelines and deposited significant amounts of sediment and debris on Virgin Islands National Park's iconic coral reefs. The storms caused 90 vessels to wash aground or sink within the park and destroyed stands of Pillar coral, a threatened species. In addition, they substantially damaged the park's largest concession operation with operations mainly at Cinnamon Bay, as well as Caneel Bay Resort, the largest single employer on the island.

Immediately following Hurricanes Irma and Maria, the National Park Service activated an Incident Command Structure at all NPS sites within the Caribbean. The Incident Management Team (IMT) was delegated with the authority to protect human life and operate safely, initiate

employee assistance programs, and manage and support damage assessment teams. The IMT mobilized hotshot firefighting units and sawyer crews to remove debris from roads, parking lots, and walkways; completed initial building repairs; and restored operations where possible to help reinstate park visitation in the Territories.

In the immediate aftermath of the storms, to assist in the recovery efforts, the NPS:

- made the visitor center at Virgin Islands National Park available to St. John residents as a temporary shelter;
- helped facilitate the evacuation of St. John residents by allowing the U.S. Coast Guard and others to use the NPS dock to transport residents away to safety;
- provided fuel to operate generators at local health clinics, allowing basic medical attention to be administered;
- provided staging areas used by the U.S. Navy for staging recovery supplies and equipment, and BBC Electric to restore St. John's power grid;
- provided radio and dispatch support to augment remaining emergency radio services and helped ensure emergency services were available on the island;
- established a regularly scheduled meeting that remains in effect today on park grounds for Territorial, Federal, non-profit entities, and the public to share information about the status of hurricane recovery efforts and needs of the island; and,
- provided its Red Hook location and associated dock to the Virgin Islands Territory to support the U.S. Coast Guard and U.S. Army Corps of Engineers projects to remove nearly 500 displaced vessels in Territorial waters outside of park boundaries.

In turn, the NPS received tremendous support from other Federal agencies, the Territorial government, non-profit organizations and the business community, and the citizens of the U.S. Virgin Islands, including:

- assistance from Federal, Territorial, nonprofit and volunteer disaster relief entities connecting NPS employees with aide opportunities;
- support from over 450 Federal and contract employees who added \$3.1 million to the local economy, and the local vendors who provided the products, lodging and related services to aid these federal and contract employees in conducting their response and recovery missions;
- electrical service from BBC Electric to repair and install electrical components necessary to restore electricity to St. John park facilities;
- fuel for park vehicles provided by Global Disaster Immediate Response Team to support assessment and repair activities and to fuel small generators for all employees who needed them; and,
- support from Caneel Bay Resort with utility issues at visitor use areas, aiding our ability to reestablish utilities more broadly within Virgin Islands National Park.

The success of these efforts have relied upon, and been representative of, effective collaboration and a shared commitment among the various stakeholders to meeting the needs of the communities and future visitors to the islands.

On St. Croix, Christiansted National Historic Site resumed normal operations in November. The water and hiking trails at Buck Island Reef National Monument are open to visitation, while the

pier sustained significant damage and remains closed. The Salt River Bay visitor contact station sustained substantial damage and also remains closed.

On St. John, Virgin Islands National Park the park reopened in late February, but is still in the major recovery phase. Initial repairs restored basic visitor services and reopened the park's visitor center, trails, beaches and their adjacent waters. However, much of the park's infrastructure supporting visitor use — such as roads, water systems, signs, concession facilities and fee structures — were destroyed or badly damaged. Over 500 archaeological sites and historic structures need stabilization and 35 derelict vessels remain in sensitive habitats.

The ongoing closure of Caneel Bay Resort, the largest single employer on St. John, has left an indelible imprint on visitor services and the community at large. We are committed to working with all our partners to reopen Caneel Bay Resort. The same holds true for park concession operations on St. John, which are also still reeling from the negative impacts of the 2017 storms. The NPS recognizes the importance of these businesses to the economy of the U.S. Virgin Islands and is dedicated to working with them to resume operations as soon as possible. As such, NPS is committed at the highest levels to have senior regional and headquarters staff visit the islands as needed to ensure rapid progress is made with rebuilding. Since the hurricane, both Deputy Secretary Bernhardt and the Assistant Secretary for Insular Areas, Doug Domenech have traveled to the Virgin Islands to assess the damage. The Department has appreciated the cooperation and collaboration with Delegate Plaskett and Governor Mapp and we look forward to continuing these efforts throughout the recovery process.

Recovery of the Virgin Islands parks will be significantly spurred by funds from the emergency hurricane supplemental appropriation recently approved by Congress. The total amount of recovery funding that has been allocated to the NPS is \$207 million. That amount will be distributed among all of the National Park System units on the mainland and in the Caribbean that were impacted by the 2017 storms.

Mr. Chairman, this concludes my statement. I would be pleased to answer any questions you or other members of the Subcommittee may have.