



One Hundred Fifteenth Congress
U.S. House of Representatives
Committee on Homeland Security
Washington, DC 20515

October 14, 2017

The Honorable Elaine C. Duke
Acting Secretary
U.S. Department of Homeland Security
245 Murray Lane SW
Washington, D.C. 20528

Dear Acting Secretary Duke:

I write to express my profound concern about the Federal disaster response efforts in Puerto Rico, including the continued failure to provide adequate clean drinking water to the Americans who live there. I call on you to expedite relief and ensure the safety of those affected by the terrible storm.

The Federal government's response in Puerto Rico has been woefully underwhelming since Hurricane Maria slammed into the island on September 20. Despite constant assurances from the Administration that relief efforts are a success, all evidence points to the contrary. For example, as of today (24 days after Hurricane Maria struck), 85 percent of Puerto Rico is without power, 42 percent of Puerto Ricans do not have phone service, 60 percent of cell towers are down, and only half of the island's banks are operational.¹ To make matters worse, although the American public is being told that 65 percent of Puerto Ricans have access to safe drinking water, news broke that survivors are being forced to resort to pumping water from a Federally designated hazardous-waste site.² This happened just days after Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) warned Puerto Ricans not to break into wells at industrial waste sites.³

¹ Governor of Puerto Rico, Status PR, <http://www.status.pr/> (last visited Oct. 14, 2017).

² John D. Sutter, "Desperate Puerto Ricans Are Drinking Water From A Hazardous-Waste Site," *CNN.Com* (Oct. 14, 2017), <http://www.cnn.com/2017/10/13/us/puerto-rico-superfund-water/index.html>.

³ Press Release, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, "EPA Hurricane Maria Update for Wednesday, October 11th," (Oct. 11, 2017), <https://www.epa.gov/newsreleases/epa-hurricane-maria-update-wednesday-october-11th> ("There are reports of residents obtaining, or trying to obtain, drinking water from wells at hazardous waste "Superfund" sites in Puerto Rico. EPA advises against tampering with sealed and locked wells or drinking from these wells, as it may be dangerous to people's health.").

As I understand it, the Dorado Groundwater Contamination Site was listed as part of the Superfund program in 2016.⁴ The site was opened on an emergency basis to provide water to disaster survivors, although the local water authority claims it was unaware that the site was designated a Superfund site.⁵ According to the EPA, the site is polluted with “industrial chemicals, including tetrachloroethylene and trichloroethylene.”⁶ Exposure to these chemicals can result in liver damage and can increase the risk of cancer.⁷ Because of the scarcity of potable water, water from the Dorado Groundwater Contamination Site is being provided to Puerto Ricans despite the fact that EPA safety assessments are still ongoing.

Reports of Puerto Ricans waiting hours to receive potentially contaminated water that could have long-term health consequences is beyond disturbing. That it happened only days after EPA warned the people of Puerto Rico to refrain from breaking into Superfund sites to access water suggests a troubling breakdown in coordination among the Federal entities playing a role in Federal disaster response activities.

Accordingly, pursuant to Rule X and Rule XI of the House of Representatives, I ask that you provide a written response to the following information, and whatever supplementary information you deem responsive, by October 27, 2017:

- Are you aware that more than three weeks after Hurricane Maria struck Puerto Rico, more than 35% of the Americans living there remain without safe drinking water?
- Are you aware that in the absence of adequate sources of potable water, Americans in Puerto Rico are drinking water from contaminated sources, including a well at the Dorado Groundwater Contamination Superfund Site?
- What are the health consequences of drinking water from the well at the Dorado Groundwater Contamination Superfund site, including to children, the elderly, and those with underlying health conditions?
- Does the Department find it acceptable for Americans living in a major disaster area to drink water from contaminated sources, including Superfund sites?
- Last week, the Environmental Protection Agency warned against obtaining drinking water from hazardous waste Superfund sites in Puerto Rico. What is the Department’s role in amplifying EPA’s warnings to both the local water utility and residents?
- What, if anything, is the Department of Homeland Security doing to provide those Americans currently drinking water from the Dorado Groundwater Contamination Superfund Site deliveries of potable water instead? When can they expect to receive sufficient deliveries of potable water?

⁴ Sutter, *supra* n. 2.

⁵ *Id.*

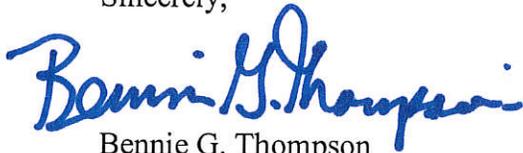
⁶ *Id.*

⁷ *Id.*

- What is the Department doing to ensure that other Americans in Puerto Rico who do not have access to safe drinking water receive regular deliveries of potable water?
- Please provide specific information about the quantity, frequency, and locations of water deliveries the Department is making to all areas in Puerto Rico without potable water.

Thank you for your attention to this request. If you have questions or require additional information, please contact Alison Northrop, Chief Director for Oversight, at (202) 226-2616.

Sincerely,



Bennie G. Thompson
Ranking Member

Cc: The Honorable Brock Long, Administrator, Federal Emergency Management Agency,
Department of Homeland Security;
The Honorable Scott Pruitt, Administrator, Environmental Protection Agency