



Congressman Pedro R. Pierluisi
Statement as Prepared for Delivery
Oversight Hearing of House Committee on Natural Resources
“Department of the Interior Spending and the President’s Fiscal Year 2015 Budget Proposal”
April 3, 2014

Thank you Mr. Chairman. I too welcome Secretary Sally Jewell and Deputy Secretary Michael Connor to the Committee this morning, and encourage them both to visit Puerto Rico as soon as their schedules allow. Puerto Rico is home to five national wildlife refuges, one important National Park Service unit—the *San Juan National Historic Site*—and although not under the direct purview of the Secretary, a gem in the U.S. Forest System—*El Yunque National Forest*—where the Department of the Interior is helping advance cutting-edge climate science. I quickly want to emphasize a few parts of the Department’s budget and mission that I support and that have great relevance for Puerto Rico.

First, the Department of the Interior is supporting ecosystem-based resource management decisions in Puerto Rico in an integrated fashion with the local community through a landscape conservation cooperative or LCC approach that your predecessor, Secretary Salazar, launched nationally in 2010. The Caribbean LCC, the most recent one formed, is bringing the best available science to bear to preserve habitat, and to respond to climate change effects on land, water, ocean, fish and wildlife, and cultural heritage resources in Puerto Rico. This approach is facilitating a great synergy of all the resource agencies and non-federal partners, and I urge the Department to continue budgeting resources for the national network of LCCs.

My second point relates to funding for the National Wildlife Refuge System. The three refuge units in particular in Puerto Rico—Cabo Rojo, Culebra and Vieques—have a significant backlog of maintenance projects totaling roughly \$50 million. The national wildlife refuges on Culebra and Vieques are directly relevant to the economies of the two island municipalities in which they

are located. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service currently controls over half of the island of Vieques and about a quarter of the island of Culebra.

As a large land manager, it is important that the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service continue working with the Department of Defense and local authorities to expedite the clean-up of these former military training range lands. While clean-up progress has been made, much remains to be done and, as areas are cleaned-up according to the final remedy reached between the Department of Defense, the Department of the Interior, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, and the local government, opportunities for transfer of the lands from the Department of the Interior to the local government will become very important. Last year, I raised these opportunities at a Fisheries, Wildlife, Oceans and Insular Affairs Subcommittee hearing and would like your commitment, Madame Secretary, to work on advancing the dialogue inside the Department about ways to rescale the Vieques National Wildlife Refuge so that lands currently within its boundaries can be opened for local economic development and recreational purposes, including through the possibility of legislation to transfer title.

Lastly, as we approach the centennial of the National Park Service in 2016, I want to highlight the role that Old San Juan and the National Park Service unit on our island fulfills for the preservation and interpretation of Hispanic heritage. The unit protects evidence of Spain's history in what is now the United States—the forts of El Morro, San Cristóbal, and San Gerónimo. There is an incredible story to tell through interpretation of these structures, and preservation of these forts and the old city walls is key to our cultural identity and to our tourism sector.

I understand the National Park Service is currently conducting a special resource study pursuant to a Congressional authorization on Fort San Gerónimo, and portions of the city walls. The study is investigating these sites for potential inclusion in the national park system, and local input was gathered in 2011. I look forward to completion of the study process, and the recommendations that the National Park Service will make to Congress on the prospect of expanding the boundaries of the San Juan National Historic Site to include these structures in Old San Juan. I urge the Department to budget the resources necessary to bring this work to

conclusion, and to continue its role in helping our community in Puerto Rico protect these treasures of local and national significance. I welcome any comment you may have about these observations, and links to from a budget perspective to priorities in Puerto Rico.

Thank you both for your public service, and I look forward to working with you on these matters for Puerto Rico and other matters pertinent to the jurisdiction of the Committee on Natural Resources.