



Congressman Pedro R. Pierluisi
Statement As Prepared For Delivery
Fisheries, Wildlife, Oceans and Insular Affairs Subcommittee Oversight Hearing
FY2013 Budget for the Fish and Wildlife Service
and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration
March 6, 2012

Good morning, Dr. Lubchenco. And thank you for your service.

I would like to address NOAA's public safety mission. Last Friday, as tornadoes touched down across 12 U.S. states, our nation was reminded of the indispensable role that the National Weather Service plays in protecting lives and property. During such events, every additional second or minute of warning counts, and can mean the difference between life and death. I commend the Weather Service for its professionalism and for all that it endeavors to do to keep our citizens safe.

I believe, however, that NOAA needs to do much more when it comes to providing warning of natural hazards in the Caribbean. While tornadoes were the emergency in Appalachia and the heartland last week, it is hurricanes, earthquakes and especially tsunamis that pose the greatest risk to the American citizens of Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands. We are reminded of this risk as we approach the one-year anniversary of the earthquake-triggered tsunami that devastated Japan. In that event, our nation was fortunate. Thousands of miles of ocean separated the earthquake's epicenter and the U.S. citizens living in our Pacific territories, Hawaii, and the west

coast of the U.S. mainland, which provided the federal government with hours to issue adequate warnings and for our citizens to heed those warnings.

We simply do not have that comfort zone in the Caribbean, where underwater earthquakes are an almost daily occurrence and tsunami-triggering submarine landslides present a real threat. In 2010, I raised the issue of establishing a Caribbean Tsunami Warning Center in a letter to then-Commerce Secretary Locke. I asked you about this proposal when you appeared before this Subcommittee last year. I note that Governor Fortuño has promised to provide local funds to complement the federal dollars needed to establish such a center. Yet, while the U.S. has pledged to establish this center in phases at annual meetings of the International Oceanographic Commission, we have yet to see anything in NOAA's budget requests to Congress that would convert those words into action.

As I laid out in detail in my letter, there are strong arguments that counsel in favor of creating a third tsunami warning center in the Caribbean, rather than continuing to rely on a center in Alaska that is nearly 5,000 miles from the region. Surely physical distance between a warning center and the monitored region is not irrelevant, or else the federal government would not have located the current warning centers—in Alaska and Hawaii—in two our nation's most tsunami-prone regions.

I note that the FY 2012 budget contains funding from proceeds of the FCC's auctioning of broadcast frequency spectrum that is intended to be used for NOAA's tsunami warning program. I also note that appropriators last year underscored the need in the Caribbean, requiring NOAA to

prepare a report on the agency's current capability to issue timely warning for the region. Thus, if this spectrum funding is expended without due attention to the Caribbean, I believe it represents a terrible missed opportunity.

Question 1: In light of the foregoing, my question to you then is this: are you confident—and willing to state clearly on the record today—that the current arrangements with the two warning centers in Alaska and Hawaii are more than sufficient for issuing fast and accurate warnings to emergency management officials in Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands in the event of a tsunami? Do you not agree that establishment of a third center, to be co-located with the Puerto Rico Seismic Network in Mayagüez, would improve NOAA's ability to protect life and property in these American territories and provide important reinforcement in the event either of the two existing centers are compromised?

Question 2: Can you assure us that the Caribbean-specific tsunami readiness report that your agency is required to submit to the Appropriations Committees by March 17th—which will mark four months since the Commerce-Justice-Science Appropriations Fiscal Year 2012 bill was enacted—will be submitted on time?

Question 3: You indicate that the emphasis of NOAA in the Caribbean is on preparing local coastal communities and the public to respond intelligently in the event of a tsunami. National Weather Service Director Dr. Jack Hayes briefed my office in 2010 that it is the agency's goal to achieve 100 percent Tsunami Readiness status in Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands in 2013. Yet, I understand that the agency will likely fall far short of this goal due to a lack of

budget prioritization. Of Puerto Rico's 44 coastal municipalities, only 20 are recognized currently as Tsunami Ready. There are no Tsunami Ready recognized communities in the U.S. Virgin Islands. Six municipalities in Puerto Rico are up for renewal this year. Will the Weather Service's Southern Region and the Caribbean Tsunami Warning Program have enough funds in Fiscal Year 2013 to certify additional coastal municipalities in Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands as Tsunami Ready?