

Rural Puerto Rican communities continue to be underserved by U.S. agencies

As we write this column in the week before Christmas 2017, it has been nearly three months since category 5 Hurricane Maria made landfall in Puerto Rico on September 20, 2017. Unlike the Texas coast which was drenched with rainfall from Hurricane Harvey that just weeks earlier was measured in feet, some 40 percent of the island still is without electrical power and damage to major roads and bridges makes many communities on the island difficult to reach with most of those in rural areas.

According to Refugee International (<https://tinyurl.com/y78l4m27>), “the U.S. response remains too slow and bureaucratic.” They point out that “the initial deployment of the US military was insufficient – for example, it paled in comparison to the magnitude of the US military response surrounding the Haiti earthquake in 2010” and Puerto Rico is a part of the US with the residents holding US citizenship.

While official estimates put the number of hurricane victims at 64, the New York Times reports that the actual death toll may be as high as 1,052 by calculating the additional reported deaths in 2017 compared to the two previous years (<https://tinyurl.com/y7gyv2lp>). In rural areas, the lack of access to immediate medical care has certainly resulted in unnecessary deaths. As Refugee International writes, “a quicker and more robust response may well have prevented many of those deaths.”

While there is a short note on the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) National Agricultural Statistics Service website that the USDA has delayed mailing the Puerto Rico Census of Agriculture forms (<https://tinyurl.com/y7hz4dzq>) and the Risk Management Agency page on national disasters and crop insurance, we could find nothing on the USDA website about the impact of Maria on Puerto Rican agriculture.

The most recent statistics on Puerto Rican agriculture comes from the 2012 Census of Agriculture (<https://tinyurl.com/ycjy89bb>). At that time, there were 13,159 farms with 12,000 of those farms being classified as individual or family farms. Only 2,156 of Puerto Rico’s farms were reported by the 2012 Census of Agriculture to use the crop insurance program.

The area under agricultural production encompasses a total area of 568,000 acres and the average farm was 43.2 acres. 8,000 of the farms in Puerto Rico were smaller than 19.4 acres.

Looking at the average age of the principal operator, Puerto Rican farmers were not too different from farmers on the mainland. The average age was 59 with 507 of the 13,159 principal operators under the age of 35. Of the households of the principal operators, 7,876 reported total income of less than \$20,000.

With such a large portion of Puerto Rican farmers at subsistence or near-subsistence levels of income, the impact of Maria on farm households must be devastating.

The US Forest Service, which is a part of USDA, also has responsibilities Puerto Rico. It administers the El Yunque National Forest which “is the only tropical rain forest in the national forest system. At nearly 29,000 acres, it is one of the smallest in size, yet one of the most biologically diverse of the national forests hosting hundreds of animal and plant species, some of which are found only here” (<https://tinyurl.com/ya7rtvuy>).

El Yunque was closed on September 6 in the aftermath of Hurricane Irma and has remained closed since then. According to Grizelle González an ecologist who has worked at El

Yunque for 25 years, the forest “was completely defoliated...the canopy was completely gone. It was almost like a desert landscape” (<https://tinyurl.com/ybpjze2e>).

“González says that researchers believe that “as many as one-fifth of the trees in the 28,000-acre tropical rainforest may eventually die as a result of the storm.”

While some help is reaching urban areas in Puerto Rico, much remains to be done for the rural residents and farmers who live in remote and not-to-remote areas of the island. In the end, we must remember that Puerto Ricans are US citizens and we would not tolerate the same level of inaction with regard to Iowa’s 3.4 million residents as we have seen with Puerto Rico’s 3.1 million people.

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