

PASQUINES

Federal corruption and nationalist policies bottleneck Puerto Rico's hurricane recovery

Keegan Sweeney

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The corruption of two FEMA agents and transportation constraints from The Merchant Marine Act of 1920—commonly known as the Jones Act—impeded emergency aid efforts from the United States to Puerto Rico in the wake of Hurricane Irma and Maria in 2017. Now, as the territory continues to recover, Puerto Rico relies on federal aid as Hurricane Fiona presents a new slew of challenges.

As Puerto Rico recovered after Hurricane Maria, the electrical grid was left ravaged by the storm, leaving efforts to restore the infrastructure in the hands of the US government. In such events, The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) is responsible for disbursing the funds under the Stafford Act for recovery. After Hurricane Maria, restoring Puerto Rico's grid became largely an effort undertaken by FEMA.

FEMA and the United States Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) have promised billions of dollars in emergency funds for Puerto Rico—yet the rollout has been slow and much of the money has not been made available.

With over 16,000 people in Puerto still without power as of October 14, the territory is in need of more federal aid as it continues to repair its infrastructure.

In the aftermath of Hurricane Maria, a scheme between Cobra Acquisitions president Donald Keith Ellison and FEMA official Ahsha Tribble hurt Puerto Rico's recovery efforts. According to the New York Times, in exchange for benefits such as a New York apartment or a helicopter ride over Puerto Rico, Ahsha Tribble used her position with FEMA to make Cobra a priority in contracting to repair the territory's power grid. The official indictment of Ellison and Tribble states that Tribble used her position for “influencing, advising, and exerting pressure on PREPA and FEMA officials, in order to award restoration work to COBRA and accelerate payments to COBRA.”

The corruption between officials from FEMA and Cobra led to higher costs for Puerto Rico's power grid repair and revenue for Cobra. The New York Times reports that, in one case, Ms. Tribble demanded that Cobra be the company to fix an exploded substation in Monacillo, PR rather than the public utility—which would have drawn fewer funds from Puerto Rico's already limited supply.

Piling on federal corruption is an archaic policy called the Jones Act put in place over 100 years ago to protect national security and bolster the United States maritime shipping industry. According to the Cato Institute, the act has not only done the opposite but continues to create supply chain issues for Puerto Rico—particularly in times of crisis.

In practice, the Jones Act allows only ships flying the US flag, carrying US crews, and built in US shipyards to travel between two US seaports.

The Jones Act hurts the United States' maritime shipping industry, but namely restricts the country's ability to respond swiftly over the water in times of crisis. In the event of a federal emergency declaration, getting supplies from the mainland to places in need is crucial—and Puerto Rico faces the brunt of any restrictions on this process. US territories such as Puerto Rico are disproportionately affected by the Jones Act.

Washington's hold on Puerto Rico's supply chain echoes that of Senator Wesley Jones's shipping monopoly on Alaska when it was still a territory in the early 1900s.

After hesitating, President Donald Trump (R) waived the Jones act in 2017 as Puerto Rico recovered from Hurricane Irma and Hurricane Maria. On January 5, 2021, Biden name-dropped the Jones act in an executive order “[e]nsuring the Future is Made in all of America by all of America’s workers” citing the act as being integral to this effort.

Eight members of the Congressional Progressive Caucus called for a one-year waiver to the Jones Act in an open letter to Secretary of Homeland Security Alejandro Mayorkas. According to the letter, the congresspeople claim that lifting the Jones Act would allow Puerto Rico greater access to supplies such as oil for power plants, medicine, building materials, and food. Puerto Rico Governor Pedro Pierlusi (NPP, D) also stated on Twitter that he requested the Department of Homeland Security to intervene, allowing the ship to dock “for the benefit of our people. [translated to English]”

The Biden administration responded and went forward with a temporary waiver allowing a ship carrying over 300,000 barrels of diesel fuel to dock in Puerto Rico. The fuel is needed as many residents of Puerto Rico rely on generators to power their homes and businesses while the electrical grid is being restored. Biden has yet to clarify how long the waiver will last.

Pierlusi continued his tweet, stating that his administration continues to work on speeding up the shipments of gasoline and diesel to the territory.