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House of Representatives

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Opening Statement Ranking Member Stacey Plaskett

Hearing on “Tribal Energy Resources: Reducing Barriers to Opportunity” Subcommittee on the Interior, Energy and Environment

July 17, 2018

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for holding this hearing. Because many tribal communities are economically reliant on development of energy resources on their lands but face barriers to using those resources, I am glad we are devoting a hearing that will address continuing concerns and air solutions.

Seventeen months ago, the Government Accountability Office (GAO) High Risk Report has outlined several problems that the tribes across the country faced in the areas of energy, healthcare and education. The report characterized the Bureau of Indian Affairs’ handling of tribal energy resources as “mismanagement,” full of delays that cost revenue to struggling tribes.

One of the impediments to well-managed energy development is a failure to invest in a federal workforce to provide expertise that many tribes lack.

In fact, President Trump’s hiring freeze and reorganization have aggravated that problem.

BIA needs more funding to assist responsible energy development on tribal lands, not the status quo or possible cuts.

As Russell Begaye, president of the Navajo Nation, told a Department of Interior panel a year ago, quote: “Reducing the size of the BIA could affect the fulfillment of the trust duties the U.S. has to tribes. The BIA should be filled with experts. We need the BIA to bring in economists, technology experts and energy and resource engineers to help tribes develop the resources on their lands.”

I know from our experiences in the U.S. Virgin Islands that funding and expertise from the federal government can make a crucial difference in the lives of many.

As Hurricanes Irma and Maria cut power to tens of thousands of residences and businesses on the USVI, Island officials were already planning for a more resilient and reliable power system less reliant on fossil fuels, which are costly to ship to the territory. We realize we

need to not just rebuild, but also to reimagine the electrical power system from the ground up – and this includes long-term renewable energy generation and innovative business and financing models.

From 2009 to 2013, the U.S. Virgin Islands developed and began implementing a long-term strategy to transition from reliance on fossil fuel to a clean, sustainable energy future. With financial assistance from DOE's Office of Energy Efficiency and Renewable Energy, and from the Interior Department's National Renewable Energy Laboratory, the USVI has thoroughly evaluated its clean energy opportunities and made a \$65 million investment in solar power.

DOE and technical experts from its Renewable Energy Laboratory worked with the Islands' Water and Power Authority to identify the best combination of energy technologies for the USVI to meet its clean energy goal. In 2012, a \$600,000 grant from the Department of Interior led to development of a network of engineers, contractors and financiers who assist USVI power customers in implementing clean energy projects.

We needed and appreciated both the financing and expertise provided by the Energy and Interior departments to help the USVI reach its clean energy goals.

Likewise, such federal investment is vital in the effort to eventually transition tribes to capable management of their resources. Proposals to simply give tribes more autonomy without investing more in expertise to guide them through complicated processes involving environmental laws, rights-of-way and leases could leave some tribes open to exploitation or other harm.

I am concerned that President Trump's and Secretary Zinke's proposed reorganizations could severely compromise the ability of the BIA -- and the Department of Energy's Office of Indian Energy and Economic Development -- from providing the expertise many tribes need.

I ask that my Republican colleagues join me in ensuring that any DOI reorganization does not further impede the BIA from fulfilling its trust responsibility and give the BIA the resources and staffing it needs to ensure the best energy future for all tribal communities.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman

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