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House of Representatives

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Opening Statement Ranking Member Stacey Plaskett Hearing on “Permitting: Finding a Path Forward” September 6, 2018

Mr. Chairman, thank you for calling today’s hearing concerning the federal permitting process and how it relates to infrastructure development.

The idea that environmental protection, not just of the natural environment but also the human environment, goes hand in hand with infrastructure development is now an old one – it goes back nearly 50 years to the passage of the National Environmental Protection Act, commonly known as NEPA.

And the call that the environmental review and permitting process become more efficient and streamlined is nearly as old.

The Virgin Islands sees both sides of this coin. With tourism and travel accounting for nearly 30 percent of the islands’ GDP, we are highly aware of the need for environmental protection.

But because of our higher cost of living, anything that potentially slows our economy – including unnecessary delays to infrastructure and responsible development – must be addressed. Delays to some projects are ongoing, and that is an impediment to our economic health. The need to fast track projects in the Virgin Islands is especially urgent as the economy recovers from the 2017 hurricane season. My office has provided assistance with numerous projects that have been delayed in the permitting process. In some instances, these delays go back as far as 12 years or more.

Mr. Chairman, I would like to have included in the record a letter I recently wrote to Rear Admiral Tim Gallaudet, Assistant Secretary of Commerce for Oceans and Atmosphere and Mr. Chris Oliver, Assistant Administrator for Fisheries, for assistance with the federal permitting of an energy infrastructure in St. Croix. The permit application to install a single point mooring buoy system to allow the Limetree Bay Terminals facility to receive shipments from very large bulk fuel carriers, has now been pending for a year. This is just one example of a list of projects that I have been asked to assist with their permitting application. Applicants incur extraordinary costs as a result of the delays in the process.

In 2017, President Trump issued two executive orders with the aim of streamlining the environmental review and permitting process. But it turns out these executive orders are mostly redundant or superfluous to bipartisan laws already on the books.

Since 2012, Congress has passed three major laws designed streamline NEPA. Each one refined some permitting requirements and provided the federal government with new tools to speed up environmental reviews.

The FAST Act, in particular, created the Federal Permitting Improvement Steering Council, which answers to the president. Comprising members from 13 agencies, it is designed to coordinate and expedite the permitting process.

But President Trump has yet to appoint a permanent executive director to the Council. And a fee structure to collect money from project sponsors so that the Council can facilitate faster reviews has yet to be established.

So we have all the tools we need to expedite the permitting process – if we fully fund them.

But this is where President Trump's proposed budget for Fiscal Year 2019 fell short. It called for a staggering one-third cut in the budget of the Environmental Protection Agency and a 16 percent cut from the Department of the Interior.

It's hard to see how we can speed up the permitting process when the President is calling for drastic cuts to the agencies that oversee much of that process.

We know what the answers are. We just need to fund them.

I thank the witnesses for their appearances today and look forward to their testimony.

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