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‘Disgusted.’ Why Americans Are Still Waiting on Congress for Disaster Relief

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May 6, 2019 7:09 AM EDT



Americans have seen a series of devastating hurricanes and deadly wildfires over the past few years, but millions of people are still desperately waiting for help as a \$14

billion federal disaster relief bill is still stalled—in part due to a clash between President Trump and Democrats over how much money should go to Puerto Rico.

Nearly 18 months after the Category 4 Hurricane Maria tore through Puerto Rico and killed an estimated **2,975 people**, the U.S. commonwealth's residents are still grappling with **food shortages** across the island; a lack of reliable access to healthcare, electricity, and internet; damaged roads, and crumbling buildings.

Democrats have demanded more aid for the island than the \$610 million to fund a gap in Puerto Rico's nutritional assistance program outlined in a Republican-sponsored bill introduced this past February. The president appeared to agree to the amount, but Democrats and those like Erica Gonzalez, the deputy director of the #Power4PuertoRico coalition of advocacy organizations, say Washington needs to have a better commitment to helping the island given that it is also going through a debt crisis and austerity program, while simultaneously trying to rebuild and recover.



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Gonzalez, speaking to *Fortune* from the island, says the austerity program only exacerbates the delayed federal aid. Essential services like food coupons were one of the first programs to be cut, to the tune of 25%, according to Gonzalez. There has been some progress in terms of the coalition's ability to push for a waiver to some Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) assistance, which states infrastructure must be returned to the condition it was in before.

Gonzalez said this is one of the central challenges to rebuilding schools and vulnerable coastal communities, which were already in some disrepair before Maria due to the island's debt crisis: "You can't return something from broke to broke, it's just to leave the island...more vulnerable." However, she said FEMA has been attempting to give that waiver "a very narrow reading," leaving infrastructure open to further damage as this year's hurricane season approaches.

Trump has continued his belief that Puerto Rico has misspent the money it has already received, despite the Puerto Rican government's efforts to be transparent about a FEMA spending [breakdown](#) and issuing a report estimating its need at \$139 billion. Gonzalez said she thought even a [1,700-page report](#) from the National Oceanic Atmospheric Agency (NOAA), detailing just how vulnerable millions of residents are to climate change without efforts to make those communities more resilient, are not enough for Trump.

“Nothing would be enough because he believes Puerto Ricans are not deserving of support,” she said.

Island residents are not alone in their frustration over the lack of disaster relief funding. From Mexico Beach, Fla., to Santa Rosa, Calif., the ravages of Hurricanes Michael and Maria, as well as structural and environmental damage from the fires, are still to be repaired. Al Cathey, mayor of Mexico Beach tells *Fortune* he had “no time to pick sides” between Congress and Trump, and he felt Puerto Rico receiving aid was a separate issue. His message is simple: “I don’t really have an opinion about whether or not who else needs or doesn’t need help. I can only just say [my city] and the panhandle of Florida...we’re in dire need.”

Cathey, whose city was one of the first and hardest hit by the Category 5 storm last summer and reported 80% destruction, said he was “disgusted” and found it “very disturbing” the federal bill has not gotten passed as yet.

While most of the approximately 1,100 residents have home insurance to help with repairs, city officials have been relying on FEMA aid since Hurricane Michael to fix municipal damage like roads, public buildings, water, and sewer systems. But even that comes with problems.

Cathey was grateful for all the help, but expressed concern about how the city would ever catch up on fixing the damage because FEMA operates on a reimbursement basis. With a budget of just \$3.5 million, there is little means to cover the community's estimated costs of damages of at least \$35 million with just the FEMA system in place.

He also noted FEMA has a boilerplate checklist, and the paperwork required to receive reimbursements was cumbersome for smaller cities like his with limited staff and a fast-approaching 2019 hurricane season.

Despite all that, Cathey said Mexico Beach has been able to get thousands of residents and municipal customers plugged back in to the city water system, but

day-to-day life still involves traveling to neighboring towns for basics like a gas stations, banks, and grocery stores.

The lack of help is not necessarily a lack of visibility, according to Cathey. Both the President and Florida Governor Ron DeSantis have visited Mexico Beach, with the governor seeing the damage more than once.

But as frustrating as the federal bill being held up over Puerto Rico is, Cathey said what is “much more alarming” is Florida also not being able to pass its own disaster relief package. The mayor thought it had to do with the smaller number of representatives from the panhandle region in the state legislature compared to Miami, Jacksonville, or Tallahassee.

All Cathey has to say now to politicians is that the city and the region “feel forgotten” by both the state and Congress, adding, “If you can’t give us what we need, then what good are you?”

While Santa Rosa Mayor Tom Schwedhelm’s city was devastated in wildfires dating back to 2017, he told *Fortune* more than half of the private homes in town have either been rebuilt or are in some stage of reconstruction.

“However, as more homes come back online, the more we hear from residents wondering what the plan is for getting public infrastructure in their neighborhood in order,” he noted.

There too, FEMA assistance has been helpful, but not enough—and there are limitations.

“Federal disaster recovery guidelines, in some cases, aren’t designed to address the unique recovery and mitigation circumstances seen in urban wildfires,” Schwedhelm said. The city also faces at least \$20 million in municipal damage and repairs, including some areas where burnt trees have yet to be removed.

The mayor also estimated an additional \$20 million in costs for projects not covered under FEMA but related to the wildfire damage, like “rebuilding of a lost fire station, street repairs, street tree recovery, repair of the sidewalks and park restoration.”

The lack of federal funding to buoy some of these projects has also put a glaring light on the lack of affordable housing in the city for low income and vulnerable residents.

Schwedhelm did credit state lawmakers in California for their efforts, however, helping his city point out some of the problems with the FEMA system. But 18

months on, Santa Rosa has “undefined funding sources for our recovery,” which includes repairing roads damaged while FEMA was removing debris after the Tubbs and Nuns wildfires.

Congress is still discussing the bill after returning from a two-week recess, and Democrats are likely to counter with their own \$17 billion in early May.

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