



2015-16 UN World Habitat Award  
2012 EPA National Achievements in Environmental Justice Award  
2009 American Planning Association, Paul Davidoff Award  
Case study for the Harvard Kennedy School of Government

October 14, 2016

VIA: [prtaskforce@mail.house.gov](mailto:prtaskforce@mail.house.gov)

The Honorable Orrin Hatch  
Chairman  
Congressional Task Force  
on Economic Growth in Puerto Rico

Dear Mr. Chairman and Members of the Task Force:

I write in response to your request to receive recommendations, information, and feedback regarding aspects that affect Puerto Rico's economic development. In this context, I raise to your attention the urgent need to advance the ongoing Caño Martín Peña infrastructure and ecological restoration projects in San Juan, Puerto Rico. Also, I request the opportunity to present an oral brief on this important issue.

For decades, residents of the communities along the Caño Martín Peña have endured harsh and unjust conditions all their lives. In recent years, local government has been increasingly assuming its responsibility in this matter, directing financial and technical resources and programs to lift the veil of invisibility and neglect that have prevailed in these communities for far too long. Despite their central location in the heart of the San Juan metropolitan area, the Caño communities have a long history of poverty, urban overcrowding, unsafe living conditions, exposure to environmental and health hazards and marginalization. These communities are home to over 26,000 US citizens, mostly descendants of impoverished peasants who migrated to San Juan during the 1930s – 60s, after the sugar cane industry collapsed on the Island.

The eastern half of the Caño, originally between 200 and 400 feet wide and navigable, is clogged with trash, debris, and sediments, impeding the water flow between the San Juan Bay, home to Puerto Rico's busiest port, and the San José Lagoon, contiguous to the Island's main international airport. Many of the communities still lack sewer systems, discharging raw sewage through a degraded storm water sewer directly into the Caño. Epidemiological studies have correlated frequent floods to high levels of gastrointestinal disease, asthma, and skin rashes among residents, particularly affecting small children, as well as loss of school and work days. Dredging and much needed infrastructure projects could alleviate these perils.

Furthermore, projects intended for the Caño Martín Peña are part of a greater vision with benefits that extend beyond community boundaries. They will enable new recreation and tourism opportunities through a restored waterway, better urban environment and safe pedestrian walkways, as prescribed in an award winning comprehensive development plan. Most importantly, it will reduce flood related risks, increasing public safety and reducing the costs of emergency management, currently estimated in \$5.28 million per flood event. Flood control, in turn, will curtail disease prevalence reducing government costs towards

health treatment by \$38 million over the 50 year life of the project. Dredging will also reduce flooding vulnerability of the Luis Muñoz Martín International Airport.

The Caño Martin Peña initiative is not a single project but a program that includes physical improvements such as dredging, housing and infrastructure development; as well as social improvements including education, capacity building, and a healthier environment.

Both Congresswoman Nydia Velázquez and Resident Commissioner Pedro Pierluisi, members of the Congressional Task Force, have served as champions helping us ensure continuous progress in the Caño's efforts. Nonetheless, further commitment from both the federal and the local government is needed to continue supporting and partnering with the communities in their pursuit for better quality of life for residents. This is why I, on behalf of ENLACE and the residents of these communities, respectfully request the Task Force to include and assign priority in the economic growth report to the projects and programs needed for the Caño Martín Peña.

### **The solution**

The ENLACE Caño Martín Peña Project is an innovative environmental justice and social transformation initiative to restore an estuarine channel in the heart of San Juan, Puerto Rico, while promoting an inclusive, livable, and resilient city through grassroots participation and strong partnerships with over 100 allies from the public and private sectors. Building upon the capacities of the 26,000 residents in eight densely populated communities, mostly informal settlements along the Caño Martin Peña, the organized communities represented by the G-8. Inc., the Caño Martin Peña Community Land Trust, and the ENLACE Corporation, together with a pool of 400 volunteers implement a comprehensive plan that generates equitable social and economic development opportunities for Puerto Rico. By addressing major environmental degradation issues, it promotes safer and healthier communities and a restored San Juan Bay Estuary.

Since 2004, the ENLACE Project has engaged a myriad of public and private sector partners and gained recognition and political support in Puerto Rico and beyond. In times of fiscal crisis, this initiative is an example of what can be achieved working together towards a clear goal, through strong organizing and civic engagement.

**Benefits** include a restored and navigable Caño as a backbone for transforming the city; improvement health conditions for 15,000+ persons affected by frequent floods with raw sewage and mosquito transmitted diseases (dengue fever, zika, chikungunya); partial benefits of \$587 million to the Puerto Rican economy, including real estate and tourism, among others; reduced flood risk for Puerto Rico's main airport; ecologic uplift of 6,600+ acres of the San Juan Bay Estuary; 2,000+ families with land tenure security; 4,000+ jobs only during construction; 500+ families relocated to safe housing; adequate infrastructure in the communities along the Caño; a more resilient, vibrant, and inclusive city; and organized citizens exercising their rights and actively participating.

**Avoided costs** include estimated losses of \$700 + million during a 100 year recurrence flood event.

To move the project forward, be able to recuperate the Caño Martin Peña, and reach the goals of resiliency and equitable development, investment of multiple sources is needed. The key elements of the Comprehensive Development and Land Use Plan that will lead to the ecosystem restoration of the Caño entail a total estimated investment of \$600 million, of which \$390.43 million have already been identified although not fully secured. \$142.7 million depend on continued appropriations by Congress,

while local funding sources are uncertain. ENLACE has leveraged over \$100 million and other resources from local, state, and federal government, local and US foundations, and private partners towards ecosystem restoration, real estate acquisitions and relocation of families, housing, and infrastructure.

At a time of severe economic, fiscal, and financial challenges, Puerto Rico's capacity to further invest in this Project is extremely limited. Support from the US federal government is crucial.

We urge the Federal government to adopt the ENLACE Project as a model of equitable development, resiliency, and participatory democracy, and prioritize it due to the serious implications in public health and opportunities for Puerto Rico's economic development, and invest accordingly. The following specific items are needed.

1. A special allocation for relocation assistance and infrastructure in the form of federal grants.  
ENLACE and the Caño Martín Peña community land trust are in the process of relocating hundreds of families, getting them away from the channel to allow for its dredging. To address floods with highly polluted water, over 500 families have already been relocated, and two communities have been served with sewer systems. Another 600 relocations are needed, as well as safe housing alternatives in the community, and investment in new infrastructure and improvements to 50+ year old infrastructure.
2. A temporary waiver of federal matching requirements for this project, as needed.  
Most federal programs require a local match to access federal funds. But the community is poor, the municipality is strapped, and the Commonwealth is all but bankrupt. Although the Commonwealth has identified some matching funds, future availability is uncertain.
3. Continued appropriations by Congress under the Water Resources Development Act of 2007  
Initial appropriations were made in FY 2016. It is critical to ensure continuity and the US Congress and US Army Corps of Engineers commitment to complete the Caño's ecosystem restoration as a priority in the years to come.
4. An inter-departmental task force that focuses attention and dollars in assisting the Caño  
The needs of the Caño and the plans of ENLACE cut across the silos and boundaries of various federal agencies: US Army Corps of Engineers; EPA; HUD; FEMA, DOT, SBE, and HHS. These various federal agencies don't always work well together and their lack of coordination makes it difficult for the Caño to access federal programs. Currently, they are part of the Urban Waters Federal Partnership, but other than the EPA, decision makers are not at the table. Also, we need to ensure continued commitment from the US Army Corps of Engineers to complete the ecosystem restoration of the Caño as a priority in the years to come.

To better grasp the critical situation affecting thousands of children, elderly, and other vulnerable population, we encourage you to watch a 5 minute video in the following link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=naav6Ro3eo>. Shall you need further information, please contact Ms. Lyvia N. Rodríguez at (

Sincerely yours,

  
Lyvia N. Rodríguez Del Valle  
Executive Director

c. Carmen L. Febres Alméstica, G-8, Grupo de las Ocho Comunidades Aledañas al Caño Martín Peña, Inc.  
María E. Hernández Torrales, Fideicomiso de la Tierra del Caño Martín Peña



## Attachment

