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OPENING REMARKS

Natural Resources Committee Markup on HR 900  
Tuesday 23, 2007

Let me begin by thanking Chairman Rahall and Ranking Member Young for your leadership in holding this markup today on an issue that impacts, not just the 4 million U.S. citizens that reside in Puerto Rico and the over 4 million that have moved to the U.S. Mainland, but our Nation as a whole. You have always been two of the most outspoken supporters in Congress of Puerto Rico's right to true self-determination, and it is my sincere hope that the process that we embark on today will lead to the final resolution of Puerto Rico's century-old colonial quandary. For that, my constituents will always be grateful.

I also want to thank Chairwoman Donna Christensen, with whom I have had the honor of serving in the Insular Affairs Subcommittee for the last year. We have spent countless hours in hearings and meetings on this and other issues related to our Nation's insular areas, and, while we have not always agreed on everything, I have to say that she has always been a true pleasure to work with. My sincere thanks also to my good friend and the lead sponsor of HR 900, Congressman José Serrano, who has taken time from his busy schedule as Chairman of an Appropriations Subcommittee to be with us here today. José, we would not be here today if it wasn't for your support and hard work.

While I am at it, I want to thank the 22 Members of this Committee who sponsored HR 900. Your support means the world to me. Last but not least, I want to thank the Committee and Subcommittee staff on

both sides for your hard work and dedication.

Today, this Committee will vote on whether to initiate a process that could lead, once and for all, to the final resolution of Puerto Rico's century-old political status dilemma. Congress, and this Committee specifically, have embarked on this road before. The issue of Puerto Rico's political status has been broached by this Congress in no fewer than 66 bills and resolutions on the House side, and no less than 27 in the Senate. Over 50 Congressional hearings have been held on the subject, including 4 in the last two years. Yet, here we are today, 109 years after the United States was granted sovereignty over Puerto Rico as a result of the Treaty of Paris, and 90 years after Puerto Ricans were conferred U.S. citizenship, still a disenfranchised group within our own Nation. Granted, what we are about to vote on today is only a single, small step. But it is a step that we need to take, and that we need to take now.

With 130 bipartisan cosponsors, including Chairman Nick Rahall, Ranking Member Don Young, and 20 other Members of the Committee, the bill before us today would implement the self-determination process recommended by the 2005 Report by the President's Task Force on Puerto Rico's Status.

Chairman Rahall will offer an Amendment in the Nature of a Substitute that would implement, in a simplified manner, the purposes of HR 900. As Puerto Rico's sole Representative in the U.S. Congress, I respectfully ask that you join me in supporting this Amendment.

As amended, HR 900 simply provides the people of Puerto Rico with the opportunity to choose between maintaining their current political status with the United States or opting for a constitutionally-

viable permanent non-territorial status in a Congressionally-sanctioned plebiscite. Contrary to what you are being told by others, that's it. Nothing more, nothing less.

Fellow Members, Puerto Rico has been a U.S. territory since 1898 - longer than any other in our Nation's history. We have been U.S. citizens since 1917. From the trenches of the Marne, to the beaches of Normandy; from the Han Ton River to the hills of Nam Dong; from the mountains of Tora Bora to the village of An-Nasariyah, thousands of Puerto Rico's best have valiantly fought in the defense of our Nation. Many have paid the ultimate price, including 68 in our Nation's current War Against Terror. Yet, these men and women who so gallantly were willing to serve and give up their lives in the defense of the values of liberty, justice and democracy for which our great Nation stands for, were not even able to vote for their Commander-in-Chief.

Perhaps, the biggest irony of it all is that today will be my only opportunity to vote on this measure which, if enacted - as you can appreciate - would have a profound impact on my 4 million constituents. That is the biggest paradox of it all. Puerto Ricans are citizens of the greatest democracy in the history of mankind. Yet we are unable to fully participate in this democracy that we so much admire and cherish.

I know that every single Member of this Committee, on both sides, has been heavily lobbied by the Governor's office, his countless consultants and their opportune allies in the English Only movement - as they say, politics makes for strange bed fellows. But this should come as no surprise, as every time the Congressional leadership, whether it be Republican or Democrat - makes any progress on

bipartisan legislation to redeem America's promise of government by consent of the governed, they all team up to oppose equal rights for millions of U.S. citizens.

My humble request to the Members of this Committee is that you simply read the Chairman's substitute, and reach your own conclusion. The question that we are asking the people of Puerto Rico is quite simple and to the point: **Do you want to remain as you are, or do you want to move into something different?** It does not get much simpler than that. As to what happens next, the fact is that the bill does not preclude Puerto Rico from taking any steps it deems necessary to implement the results of the plebiscite. These include drafting local legislation, entering into negotiations with Congress, **or even calling for the Constitutional Convention that the Governor so fervently defends now,** but which he never even mentioned when he served on this very Committee in the 107th and 108th Congresses. My point is that it is hard to believe that anyone that sincerely wants to move this process forward could oppose the Chairman's substitute - or HR 900 as originally introduced, for that matter - in good faith.

Chairman Rahall, Ranking Member Young, fellow members. What we have before us is a historic opportunity. We can either choose to look the other way, as some would want us to, or live up to the times and take up the challenge. I sincerely hope this Committee, and this Congress, chose the latter. After 109 years under the U.S. flag, and 90 as U.S. citizens, Puerto Ricans deserve no less.

Thank You.