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My name is Camilla Feibelman, coordinator of the Sierra Club of Puerto Rico. I am here representing our chapter President, Angel Sosa, and over 1,000 local members concerned about the status of Puerto Rico's environment. We are strictly non-partisan with no organizational opinion on Puerto Rico's political status. We are concerned, however, that the Island's development model over past decades has imperiled the viability and success of any status formula that the Puerto Rican people may choose in the future.

I also want to point out that we are **one** of many environmental and community organizations working to protect the Island's environment. Some of these entities have been in place for decades, leading local efforts on issues I will discuss in my testimony: ^{i, ii, iii, iv}

SOLID WASTE - On average, Puerto Rico generates 5.56 lbs. of solid waste per person per day compared to 1.7 in Latin America, 2.2 in Europe and 4.5 in the US. As an Island we have entirely failed to meet our 1996 Reduction and Recycling Act goal of 35% recycling rates.

And now, rather than creating Green jobs through a serious effort to reduce waste, recycle and compost, our current Administration is proposing as many as three incinerators that will require a significant, fixed volume of solid waste to become operational. This would undermine sustainable waste management initiatives, and even worse, open the door to importation of waste materials. Since the Commonwealth is proposing to develop the new incinerators through a public-private partnership, minimum profits have to be guaranteed by the government in case they fail to generate enough revenue to cover their operational cost – increasing the burden on taxpayers. Note that, on average it takes up to 10 years to build an incineration facility. Meanwhile we will be drowning in trash.

ENERGY: 99.5% of Puerto Rico's energy is produced from burning fossil fuels (72.7% oil, 13.3% coal and 13.5% natural gas).

Rather than taking a serious look at solar and wind energy (when it is appropriately placed), this government is selling trash as a renewable energy source. It is not.

The administration is also promoting construction of a new coal fired power plant in Guayama, a community already suffering from highly toxic fly ash that is being used as fill by an existing coal power plant — with no oversight. These proposals go in the opposite direction to what the US government and the international community are promoting to tackle climate change. Coal-fired power plants are among the world's biggest emitters of CO₂ global warming gas.

WATER: According to the Caribbean Division of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) “45% of the population of Puerto Rico, almost two million people, lack sanitary sewer service, thus, most people discharge sewage directly into the bodies of water or use septic tanks, most of which do not work adequately.”

Considered a vital source of water by the US Forest Service, and providing for nearly 1/4 of the Island population, Puerto Rico's Karst Region, is being threatened by the Fortuño administration. It wants to repeal a study ordered by law which requires the conservation of at least 35% of the Karst. Most of the pharmaceutical and dairy industry established on the Island, and responsible for more than 100,000 direct, indirect and induced jobs, depends on the underground water resources produced in the Karst region.

ROADS: According to the 2000 U.S. Census 89% of the workers use private vehicles to reach their jobs, pointing to the lack of reliable and effective mass transportation. Puerto Rico has around 25,000 kilometers of roads, an average of 1.58 kilometers of road per km² of territory, ranking the Island 21 in the world. As such, a considerable portion of citizens' household income has to be allocated to gas and car expenses.

Nonetheless, the current administration continues its road-building efforts cutting through the Karst Region with the extension of PR #22 in the west from Hatillo to Aguadilla, and considering an extension to Route #66, which would cut through the Northeast Ecological Corridor, one of the most important, now unprotected, natural areas in Puerto Rico.

TOXICS: The Agency for Toxic Substance and Disease Registry recently retracted their opinion that no health hazards exist from the decades of bombing that occurred in Vieques. But now, the local Environmental Quality Board has under consideration the burning of vegetation determined to contain toxic compounds, as a way to reveal unexploded ordnance, a measure that will expose residents to further health risks.

LAND USE: As of 2008, only 27 of 78 municipalities had approved land use plans. And Island-wide we have failed to produce the land use plan required by law. Our agricultural and coastal lands are therefore at risk.

Meanwhile the current, local Administration promoted and the legislature has passed a new Construction Permitting Law. It drastically reduces the rights of communities to participate in permitting processes, by limiting access to formal participation and to the courts, thus repealing basic civil rights.

- agriculture: According to the National Agricultural Statistics Services (NASS), between 1998 and 2002 Puerto Rico lost 20% of its agricultural land to other uses. Meanwhile we import 85 – 90 % of our food supply. The current government administration is making the situation worse by allowing urban developments in agricultural lands on a case by case basis, and by repealing laws that established agricultural reserves.

- coast: According to recent studies, in the year 2000, some 287,849 persons lived in coastal areas exposed to flood hazards, equivalent to an increase of 12.1% over 1990. These people will pay the heaviest price when the next hurricane or tsunami hits.

-natural protected areas: Based on the most recent study, only 7.6% of Puerto Rico is protected land compared to the 30% recommended by local and national Nature Conservancies

Sadly, in October of last year, despite a three party legislative effort to protect the Northeast Ecological Corridor (NEC), Governor Luis Fortuño, in coordination with Secretary of Natural and Environmental Resources, Daniel Galán, and President of the Planning Board, Eng. Hector Morales, rescinded the area's designation as a Nature Reserve, in an act unprecedented in Puerto Rico's history. Now the second most important Leatherback turtle nesting beaches in US jurisdiction could be opened to luxury residential developments, roads and malls. For these reasons we have petitioned the Federal Government to designate the area as critical habitat for the critically endangered Leatherback turtle.

In coming days these elected leaders will announce a new reserve. They will propose to permanently remove 1/4 of the Corridor's lands as nature reserve, while adding some marine and river protections, but ultimately what they will achieve is a devastating fragmentation of El Yunque National Rainforest's coast. The local

government is spending what we can assume to be hundreds of thousands of dollars to promote the candidacy of El Yunque, in an international contest to choose the new 7 natural wonders of the world – even while opening its very coast to construction. We had hoped to develop a true ecotourism destination around El Yunque, providing the million annual visitors to the Forest Service’s only Rain Forest an opportunity to see turtle nesting, to visit the bioluminescent lagoon and to stay in our Gateway Communities of Luquillo and Fajardo, patronizing local business. But that vision of economic development through environmental protection is under threat.

As you can see from my testimony, we believe strongly in the protection of the environment for intrinsic reasons and because our quality of life is so closely linked to its protection. Economic development is a means whose ends should make all of our life’s better.

Finally, we are not environmentalists nor are we activists, we are active citizens that believe in our government and our duty to participate in its processes. We are here to help this Island government lead us better. Lead us into the Green Economy, not away from it. What is the status of Puerto Rico? In peril, to say the least. “Such is Life,” some might say. We don’t think so. We say our environmental status is what we as citizens make it. We hope and expect that any actions or decisions that the Taskforce and the people of Puerto Rico make will achieve the sustainable development of this Island.



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ⁱ Center for Sustainable Development Studies. (2009). *Towards Intelligent Development ("Getting to Smart Growth) – 10 Principles and 100 Strategies for Puerto Rico*. Metropolitan University. 159 pages.

ⁱⁱ International Institute of Tropical Forestry. (2001). *Puerto Rican Karst – A Vital Resource*. US Department of Agriculture Forest Service. Gen. Tech. Report WO-65. 100 pages.

ⁱⁱⁱ López Marrero, T. del M. & N. Villanueva Colón. (2006). *Puerto Rico Environmental Atlas*. San Juan, PR: Editorial de la Universidad de Puerto Rico.

^{iv} Department of Natural and Environmental Resources and Puerto Rico Planning Board (2008). *Comprehensive Land Use and Management Plan for the Northeast Ecological Corridor Nature Reserve*. San Juan, PR.