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GUEST VIEWPOINT

Why Oregon should care about Puerto Rico



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For The Register-Guard

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Puerto Rico is an archipelago in the Caribbean and a U.S. territory since 1898. Puerto Ricans are U.S. citizens, serve in the U.S. military and have contributed to the economic growth and defense of the United States. Yet most Americans on the mainland ignore Puerto Rico's existence and its significant place in U.S. history.

This is dangerous at a time when Category 4 Hurricane Maria has left the island and the U.S. Virgin Islands devastated — without electricity or water; with limited access to food, water, medicines and transportation; with thousands of people displaced from their homes; and with floods and ruptured dams that threaten its most vulnerable populations. Public health and safety are compromised more by the minute.



As a friend stated: “I have supplies for a week for me, my mom and my grandmother who are elderly and require medical attention. Diesel is running out. I will have to go out in a week. But where? And will I find what I need? Everything is chaos and desperation.” Why should Oregonians care?

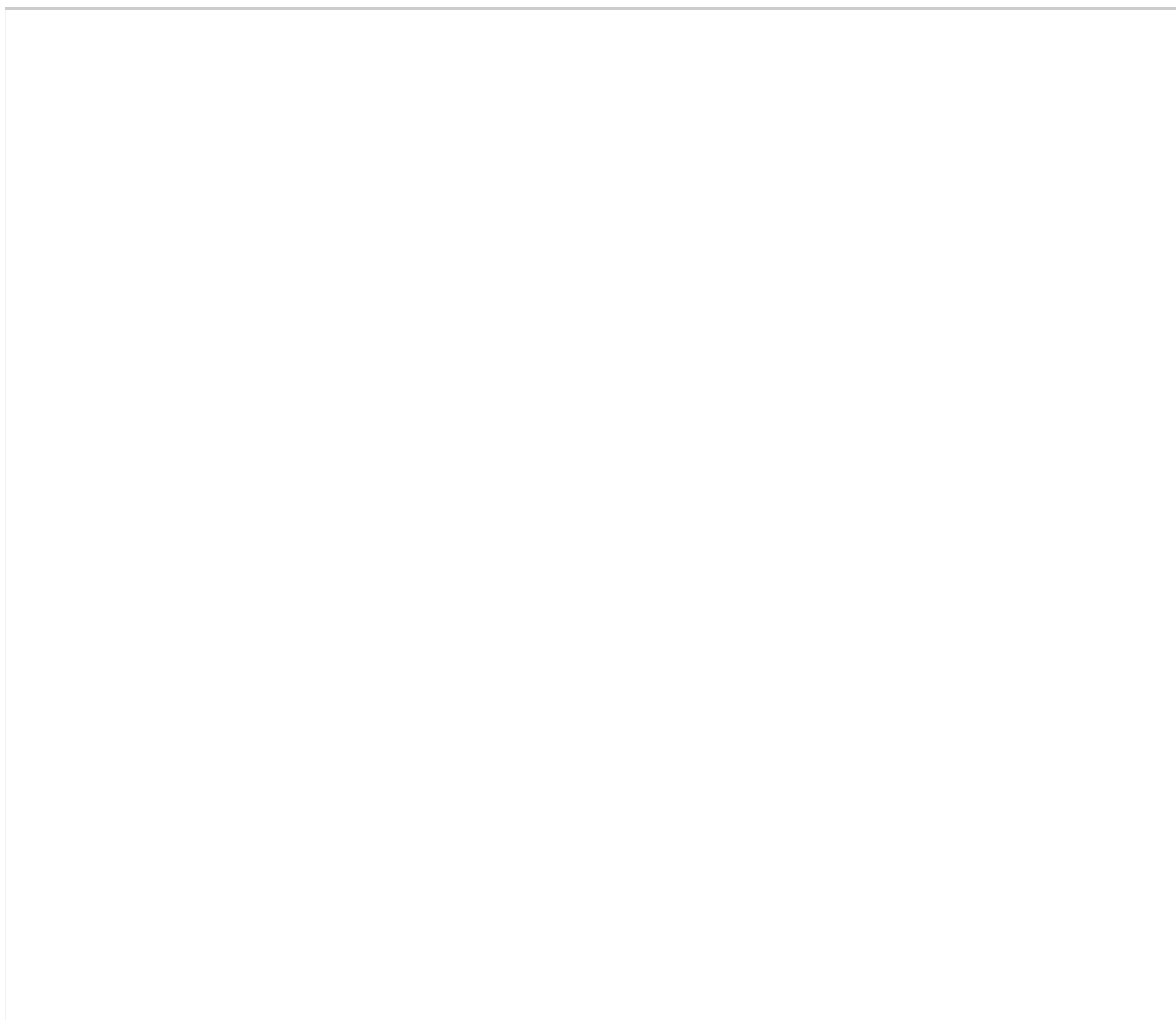
Why should we call our representatives in Congress to ask for urgent relief and multiyear commitments for the economic recovery of Puerto Rico? Here are a few reasons.

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1) People’s lives are in immediate danger — especially children, the elderly, people needing medical attention, those who lost everything, and those who are trapped in their houses.

2) As Oregon representatives seek aid in the wake of damage produced by wildfires and climate change in Oregon, they may face roadblocks similar to those encountered by those advocating for Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands. We can set precedents that support assistance to multiple locations at once.

3) A strong Puerto Rican community in Oregon contributes to the state's educational, legal, medical, environmental and public service sectors. This community should be supported right now. We are Oregonians, too.



4) Puerto Rico has no voting representative in Congress, which means that it needs the advocacy of others. Puerto Ricans are U.S. citizens who can vote in presidential elections only when living on the mainland, not in the islands.

5) We owe it to Puerto Rico. Why? The current crisis is the product of long-term U.S. policies that have left the archipelago in dire economic circumstances and with serious infrastructure

problems. Yet Puerto Rico has provided the United States with multiple opportunities to grow economically, test foreign policy and further defense agendas.

Puerto Rico served as a strategic post of the U.S. armed forces during both world wars, as the testing ground for military interventions — including the Gulf War — and as an experimental site for explosives and weapons that have left significant sites uninhabitable and polluted.

U.S. health authorities initially tested the birth control pill on Puerto Rican women who were not aware of the experiment and at times were left infertile.

Puerto Ricans provided significant farm and factory labor in the northeastern U.S. and other areas in the mid-20th century. For most of the 20th century, U.S. textile, pharmaceutical and other companies were exempted from taxes and benefited from a workforce that had been displaced by U.S. economic development policies. For many U.S. corporations, Puerto Rico was the testing ground of sweatshop manufacturing models of production now employed throughout Latin America, the Caribbean and Asia.

Today, Puerto Ricans continue to contribute — serving on the Supreme Court, in universities and in the armed forces, among other institutions.

After the federal minimum wage was guaranteed for Puerto Ricans in the 1970s and tax exemptions were lifted in the 1990s, factories began to leave the island at an accelerated pace. For more than a decade, an extraordinary economic crisis has entailed large layoffs by government agencies, and, in 2016, bankruptcy and a fiscal control agency to which the president has assigned all appointees with almost no input from Puerto Ricans.

Puerto Rico now has one of the highest unemployment rates in the United States (10.1 percent) and is seeing an exodus of young professionals seeking opportunities on the mainland. That exodus may increase as living conditions are becoming unbearable and dangerous for many.

Puerto Ricans continue to imagine other possibilities. Many are questioning measures that would disproportionately harm low-income and middle-class populations, such as the privatization of the public university system. There have been new investments in local agriculture by young people seeking sustainable ways of producing food, protecting natural resources and increasing food security. And eco-tourism has become a site of creative endeavors to support the local economy.

We owe those young people an opportunity to survive this natural disaster and succeed. We do not know when Oregon youth may need others to advocate for them.

Alaí Reyes-Santos, an associate professor of ethnic studies at the University of Oregon, is originally from Puerto Rico and has been an Oregonian since 2005.

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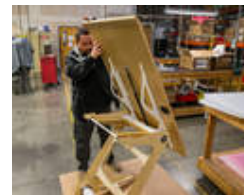
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