

STATEMENT OF CHAIRMAN AJIT PAI

Re: FCC Response to Hurricanes Harvey, Irma, and Maria

Thank you, Bureau Chief Fowlkes and Division Chief Anderson.

From unprecedented flooding in Texas to the catastrophic destruction in the Florida Keys, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands, this hurricane season has devastated communities and the communications networks that serve them. Access to reliable communications services during times of emergency is critical to enabling Americans in danger to request help and our heroic first responders to do their jobs. It can also give friends and family peace of mind that their loved ones are safe.

This month, I visited Texas and, along with Commissioner Clyburn, Florida to see firsthand the destruction there. I was struck by the breadth and the severity of the damage—homes underwater, infrastructure blown down, fellow Americans in dire straits. I was also amazed by the resiliency, will, and determination of those who were helping to pick up the pieces, extending a hand to neighbors and starting the monumental work of rebuilding.

In the meantime, the FCC continues to work closely with the Department of Homeland Security, Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), and state and local partners to restore communications networks in all affected areas, especially in Puerto Rico—where there is no power and where 91% of cell sites remain out of service.

Over the weekend, I spoke with most of the CEOs or representatives of the largest national carriers serving Puerto Rico, as well as Open Mobile, a provider of wireless services in Puerto Rico, and Claro (or the Puerto Rico Telephone Company). In those conversations, I made clear that the FCC stands ready to do whatever we can to assist these companies in restoring communications throughout the island. We've gotten some results already; for example, we helped ensure that much-needed generators and critical equipment made their way to Open Mobile, the Puerto Rico Telephone Company, and other communications providers.

I also reached out to FEMA Administrator Brock Long and his staff and emphasized the importance of prioritizing the delivery of fuel, generators, and other equipment on the island to communications providers in order to get their networks up and running. I am grateful for FEMA's willingness to work through difficult questions regarding prioritization of tasks like this.

I have also directed staff to reach out to tower owners American, Crown Castle, and SBA to see how we can work together to address Puerto Rico's communications needs.

Of course, Puerto Rico is not the only part of the United States facing severe challenges. The U.S. Virgin Islands also faces massive problems. Our staff has been focused on the situation there too. Last week, for example, representatives from my office, the Public Safety and Homeland Security Bureau, and the International Bureau met with Johann (John) A. Clendenin, the Commissioner and Chairman Emeritus of the U.S. Virgin Islands Public Service Commission to gain a more-focused understanding of the situation there post-Irma, just a couple of days before Hurricane Maria landed.

I cannot say enough about the hardworking men and women of the FCC staff who are doing their best so that Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands, and Texas and Florida, can get what they need to bring communications back on line. Among many other things, they have been acting as a conduit to ensure that the urgent needs of communications providers are relayed to FEMA and other federal partners that can help. And these folks are doing this because this is what they love to do—folks like Al Knerr, an FCC employee and volunteer firefighter who missed his daughter's 13th birthday in Pennsylvania because he wanted to help in South Florida. He and so many of you exhibit and live the phrase “public servant.”

As we move forward, the FCC and all involved in public safety communications will need to apply the lessons learned from these catastrophic events to better prepare for future emergencies. And I wholeheartedly support the first steps along those lines that the Public Safety and Homeland Security Bureau have announced today. But at this very moment, given what is currently happening in Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands, our primary focus must continue to be on recovery.

Finally, my thoughts and prayers are with the communities that were impacted by Harvey, Irma, and Maria. And my special thanks go out to all first responders and communications providers who contributed and continue to contribute to relief and recovery efforts in Puerto Rico, the U.S. Virgin Islands, Texas, Florida, Louisiana, Georgia, and Alabama.