

**STATEMENT OF
COMMISSIONER GEOFFREY STARKS**

Re: *The Uniendo a Puerto Rico Fund and the Connect USVI Fund, et al.*, WC Docket No. 18-143; *Connect America Fund*, WC Docket No. 10-90; *ETC Annual Reports and Certifications*, WC Docket No. 14-58.

Two years ago, Hurricane Maria devastated Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands claiming more than 3,000 lives and causing tens of billions of dollars in damage. This damage included nearly complete destruction of communications networks in Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands. The people of Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands have demonstrated their resilience through efforts to rebuild and restore – not only their cherished way of life, but their infrastructure. The FCC has provided timely and critical funding for network restoration and initial rebuilding in Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands over the past two years. We know that Puerto Rico is under constant threat of hurricanes and tropical storms. We need to be thoughtful of what has been done in the past in response to major storms to make sure that networks perform better, are rebuilt stronger, and are resilient in the future.

While restoration work has come a long way, it continues today. Part of that work involves rebuilding communications networks. In order to ensure that people in Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands have the same connectivity and opportunity as any other American, communications networks in Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands need to be rebuilt, not just to provide high-quality internet service, but also to have strength and redundancy as an essential part of their design to ensure that they withstand future storms.

Today's order sets up a process for providing funding to fixed and mobile service providers operating in Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands to support them in rebuilding and strengthening their networks. This support will be essential to restoring networks to provide the kind of service that the people of Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands demand and deserve, and that the Communications Act commands us to make sure is available.

This support recognizes the unique and ongoing reconstruction and restoration needs that exist in Puerto Rico and in the U.S. Virgin Islands. I was glad that the Commission recognized these unique needs and the unique conditions in Puerto Rico in two orders adopted earlier this year addressing a forbearance petition related to wired network loops and transport links. In these orders, the Commission granted portions of the petition, making changes to the way some fixed voice and broadband provider's networks are regulated. But, the Commission agreed with my requests to hold off on implementing these orders in Puerto Rico so that carriers there can focus on rebuilding rather than on regulatory changes.

Recognizing that recovery is ongoing in Puerto Rico and in the U.S. Virgin Islands and establishing a funding process to support strengthening networks, as today's order does, will provide important and necessary help to Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands. I support this order and I thank the staff of the Wireline Competition Bureau for their hard work in preparing it.