July 25, 2019

The Honorable James Inhofe  
Chairman  
Committee on Armed Services  
228 Russell Senate Office Building  
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Jack Reed  
Ranking Member  
Committee on Armed Services  
228 Russell Senate Office Building  
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Adam Smith  
Chairman  
Committee on Armed Services  
2216 Rayburn House Office Building  
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Mac Thornberry  
Ranking Member  
Committee on Armed Services  
2216 Rayburn House Office Building  
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Chairman Inhofe, Chairman Smith, Ranking Member Reed, and Ranking Member Thornberry:

We write regarding the conference committee for the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2020 (NDAA). As passed by the House of Representatives, this legislation contains a provision that will provide crucial resources for safe cleanup of hazardous military waste on the Puerto Rican island of Vieques. As conference negotiations begin, we urge you to ensure that this funding for safe Vieques cleanup is included in the final conference report in order to address health and environmental problems caused by decades of U.S. military exercises on the island.

Vieques is home to thousands of United States citizens, and it was devastated by Hurricanes Irma and Maria. For decades, the island was used for U.S. Navy bombing exercises and live-fire training,¹ which left thousands of acres contaminated with heavy metals and toxic chemicals.² We share the concern of residents that the hazardous waste and remaining munitions pose a risk of further contamination of the island and continues to threaten public health.

The military has now been engaged in cleanup efforts on the island for years³—a crucial and overdue process. But those efforts have included open-air burning and detonation of hazardous wastes.⁴ According to the Congressional Research Service, these practices entail

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“potential environmental and safety hazards,” and “[e]nvironmental concerns” have previously influenced how and where the Department of Defense carries them out. Residents and activists repeatedly condemned the open-air burning and detonation, and have expressed fears about the toxicity, human health effects, and environmental impacts of these practices. In April, 42 organizations sent a letter to the Environmental Protection Agency and Members of Congress, emphasizing that technologies now exist that offer a safer alternative to open-air burning and detonation.

The provision included in the NDAA will help effectuate the use of those safer alternatives. It allocates $10 million “for the purchase, deployment, and operation of a closed detonation chambers ... that will bring the practice of open air burning and open air detonation to the lowest practicable level.”

After decades of bombing exercises by our military resulted in severe harm to Vieques, we owe it to our fellow U.S. citizens on the island to clean up after ourselves in a safe, responsible way. As you finalize the NDAA, we therefore urge you to include the House provision that provides funding for safe Vieques cleanup. Thank you for your consideration of this request.

Sincerely,

Elizabeth Warren
United States Senator

Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez
Member of Congress

Richard Blumenthal
United States Senator

Jose E. Serrano
Member of Congress


