

POLITICS

HUD is giving Florida money to mitigate disasters. But Puerto Rico will have to wait

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The Department of Housing and Urban Development is doling out \$16 billion to states and territories for projects that prevent future disaster damage, including \$633 million to Florida.

But Puerto Rico, which is set to receive \$8.29 billion, will have to wait.

“We were particularly concerned about the controls Puerto Rico had in place,” a senior HUD official said on a background call with reporters Friday. “We’re giving them \$20 billion, which is larger than Louisiana received after Hurricane Katrina. It’s a huge sum of money which increases our risk.”

HUD officials are concerned that recent protests in Puerto Rico that caused Gov. Ricardo Rosselló to announce his resignation along with a potential [constitutional crisis](#) over naming his successor will make it harder to ensure that funds are being spent properly.

While state officials in Florida and other states like Texas and Louisiana will be officially notified of the new grant program within weeks, an action that allows them to start submitting proposals to federal officials responsible for giving out the money, Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands will get access to the money at a later time. The HUD official wouldn’t say when the money would be available for the territories.

“We’ve allowed states in the past to use their disaster money on mitigation, but this is the first time it’s been specifically allocated for mitigation projects that are focused on future events,” the HUD official said.

Examples of mitigation projects include hardening electrical grids and building roads that are better suited to withstand storms. HUD said it wants to give states and territories “as much flexibility as possible” when deciding which projects will best use the federal funds.

HUD typically allocates funds for disaster recovery, such as helping people rebuild homes. In Florida, HUD was given [\\$1.8 billion from Congress](#) after Hurricane Irma and the agency has allocated \$615 million to the state so far. In Puerto Rico, HUD was given [\\$19 billion from Congress](#) after Hurricane Maria and the agency has allocated \$1.5 billion to the territory so far.

States like Florida that receive notice from the federal government of the funds in the next few weeks must submit grant applications by early next year. After HUD reviews and approves the application, which typically takes about 60 days, the funds will be available to spend through a line of credit.

It’s not clear when Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands, which is set to receive \$774 million from HUD, can begin applying for their allocated funds or what the deadline for grant applications will be. HUD officials said they have a team of five to six people in Puerto Rico monitoring grant applications to prevent a misuse of funds.

President Donald Trump has falsely claimed on multiple occasions that Puerto Rico received more than \$90 billion in Hurricane Maria relief. The actual figure is \$42.4 billion, according to the Federal Emergency Management Agency.

“We have serious concerns and we want to make sure we’re pumping the brakes and being prudent,” the HUD official said. “We feel that we owe that to the American taxpayer.”