



Congressman Pedro R. Pierluisi
Five-Minute Floor Statement as Prepared for Delivery
The Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR) Draft Report on Vieques,
Puerto Rico
March 6, 2012

Mr./Madame Speaker:

I rise to discuss a subject of great importance to me, to the people I represent, and to many of our fellow citizens around the country—and that is the health of the nearly 10,000 residents of Vieques, Puerto Rico.

The people of Vieques sacrificed as much as—if not more than—any other U.S. civilian population to advance our military readiness. In the 1940s, the federal government expropriated lands on Vieques for use by the Navy. For over 60 years, the Navy conducted training operations on eastern Vieques, including ship-to-shore bombing, aerial bombing, and ground-based exercises. The Navy has reported that it dropped between three and four million pounds of ordnance on Vieques each year between 1983 and 1998.

Training operations on Vieques ceased in 2003, in part due to concerns about the risks to safety, health, and the environment posed by decades of weapons use. The Navy is now administering the cleanup of Vieques with support from other federal and local agencies. In 2005, the EPA

listed Vieques as one of the most hazardous sites in the U.S. To date, over 35,000 munitions on Vieques have been recovered and destroyed, including at least 19,000 live munitions.

Unfortunately, numerous studies have shown that residents of Vieques have higher rates of cancer and other chronic illnesses than residents of mainland Puerto Rico, raising serious questions about whether there may be a link between those health problems and the island's long use as a military training range.

In December, the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry, an agency within HHS, released a draft report that addresses whether there is evidence of a causal relationship between the identified health problems and the Navy's activities. ATSDR examined five "pathways" through which residents of Vieques might have been exposed to harmful contaminants—air, soil, fish, local produce and livestock, and drinking water. The conclusion reached by ATSDR in its draft report is generally the same as the conclusion reached by the agency in a series of controversial public health assessments it conducted on Vieques about a decade ago—specifically, that the available data does not establish that the contaminants in these pathways, some of which can be linked to military activities, were at levels expected to cause the reported health problems.

Because the draft report leaves many crucial questions unanswered, today I am filing extensive comments that I urge ATSDR to address before its report is finalized. My comments are intended to be constructive, because my constituents deserve a meticulous evaluation of the draft report aimed at producing concrete action by the federal government.

In my comments, I note that ATSDR repeatedly acknowledges that its conclusions are not definitive—or even close to it—because the available scientific data upon which the agency relies is incomplete in many respects. While ATSDR recommends that further studies be conducted to fill certain data gaps, the agency does not go far enough. In 2009, ATSDR stated that it expected to recommend biomonitoring to determine whether, and to what extent, residents have been exposed to harmful chemicals. Yet, in a startling reversal, the agency has now stated that “it is not recommending a comprehensive, systematic biomonitoring effort at this time.”

Given the health problems on Vieques, and the potential link between those problems and military activities, such inaction is misplaced. Therefore, I have urged ATSDR to recommend a comprehensive biomonitoring investigation. More generally, I have encouraged ATSDR and other federal agencies, working in partnership with independent researchers, to take a more active and assertive role in designing, implementing and especially funding the additional studies that are still needed to determine the nature and potential causes of the health problems being experienced by residents of Vieques. It is unacceptable that, more than a decade after ATSDR completed its first public health assessments on Vieques, fundamental questions about the safety of the island’s environment and the health of its residents remain unanswered. My constituents deserve better.

Thank you, Mr./Madame Speaker.