

HON. JOSE GARRIGA PICO
SUBCOMMITTEE ON FORESTS AND FOREST HEALTH
H.R. 539 CARIBBEAN NATIONAL FOREST ACT
MAY 11, 2005

Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Udall and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for your prompt attention to H.R. 539, the Caribbean National Forest Act. I am Senator José Garriga Picó, I am Chairman of the Federal Affairs Committee of the Puerto Rico Senate.

My colleague, the Honorable José Aponte Hernández, will speak of the importance of the Caribbean National Forest to the people of Puerto Rico. Indeed, this area has a significant impact on the quality of our lives.

I would like to focus today on the importance of the CNF to our local economy and our plans for the future.

Clearly, one of the most significant contributions of the CNF to Puerto Rico is its water. With 240 inches of rainfall each year -- over 100 billion gallons of fresh, clean water—the CNF tropical rain forest provides adequate water supplies for our people and our manufacturing and agricultural base. Without this source of water, our ability to grow and to meet the basic needs of our people and businesses would suffer.

Tourism is a growing economic force in Puerto Rico and the CNF will be crucial to that growth. According to the 2003 Economic Trends and Outlook Report of the Government Development for Puerto Rico, visitor expenditures (of which over 90% are tourist related) is nearing \$3 billion dollars per year. The 2003 report notes that tourism currently is 5.5% of Puerto Rico's GNP but that "its importance is much greater, in terms of employment and income multipliers....expenditures in tourism activities provide links, directly and indirectly, to such economic activities as transportation, communications, trade, service, restaurants, entertainment, and many others."

The Caribbean National Forest is an integral component of Puerto Rico's tourism strategy. While for many, Puerto Rico is beaches, blue sky and blue water. But Puerto Rico is much more than that. Our island is a diverse landscape with vibrant communities and impressive mountains, areas that more and more tourists are starting to experience and enjoy. The CNF is the only tropical rain forest in the U.S. Forest Service system. It is the home to a varied species of trees, orchids, ferns and vertebrates. As the letter from the American Bird Conservancy to Resident Commissioner Fortuno indicates, the endangered Puerto Rican parrot is an international draw for birders. These attributes, as well as the proximity to San Juan, account for the fact that nearly 1 million people visit the forest each year.

Mr. Chairman, the protection of the CNF through wilderness designation will ensure that the crucial resource will be fully protected for generations to come. This designation provides certainty and allows Puerto Rico to move forward with a diverse economy reliant on the CNF. Thank you.