

From the Desk of the Forest Supervisor: Progress Update on El Yunque and Summer Plans

El Yunque National Forest (EYNF) has made significant strides in response and recovery efforts since hurricanes Irma and Maria impacted the island in September 2017.

If compared to past hurricanes, we are ahead of schedule and at a higher standard. We could not have completed the over 125,000 hours of hard work without the support from employees, local communities, partners, volunteers, state and federal government agencies, and many others that assisted in assessing damages, clearing debris, restoring infrastructure and opening some areas in El Yunque to visitors and communities. Our values of public service and partnership are highlighted by what work we first prioritized and have completed.

These include:

- Access to La Coca Falls, Puente Roto and Angelito Trail was re-opened thereby increasing the number of visitors having the opportunity to experience El Yunque.
- Habitat infrastructure for the Puerto Rican Parrot endangered species has been reestablished and heritage sites have been secured from further deterioration.
- Assessments and repairs to major landslides along Forest lands continue, but great progress has been made.
- Over 100 outfitter-guide permits were issued to support the tourism industry.
- Portalito HUB: Palmer opened to the public in March as a temporary visitor center until El Portal Visitor Center is reopened, and is a shared space to be used by partners and the community as a source of information, education, engagement and collaboration.

EYNF is now transitioning from an immediate emergency incident team approach to a longer term recovery effort. This includes acquiring specialized skillsets to help us through the next several years of major rehabilitation to facilities and our operations on the Forest. Throughout the summer EYNF will focus on a set of priorities to better position the Forest to continue to be responsive to hurricane recovery projects and public services:

Permanent Repairs Needed to Catalina Forest Headquarters and El Portal Visitor Center

Forest Headquarters and El Portal sustained heavy roof damage from the hurricanes that allowed rain into the buildings creating interior damage to drywall, electrical systems, and paper files thereby creating significant mold issues.

EYNF is currently digitizing all of the paper records of the forest. Most EYNF staff will move over the summer to leased office facilities nearby while Forest Headquarters is closed and reconstructed. The reconstruction and rehabilitation of El Portal Visitor Center is also moving forward with the goal to get these facilities open as soon as possible. Construction design will include employee and partner input during design sessions in May, and completion of both facilities' reconstruction is estimated to take about two years to complete.

Issuing the Final Forest Plan

Forest staff and partners have invested six years and countless hours developing a progressive plan that incorporates the natural resources of El Yunque with the communities and stakeholders and will guide El Yunque into the next 15 years. The issuance of the plan was delayed by the hurricanes, and EYNF is working to issue the final Forest Land and Resource Management Plan and Environmental Impact Statement in August to serve as a foundation for future projects.

Commitments to the Community and Partners

While EYNF staff focuses on these priorities, some projects or services such as requests for new or additional projects involving partners or volunteers, or issuing of permits may be delayed until more efficient and functional office operations and working conditions are restored.

We are focused on the future and the important projects we know we need to do and at the quality of how we want to do them. We are still committed to our partners and communities.

As EYNF moves forward with these priorities, the public can find us at Portalito HUB: Palmer, and the Forest is proceeding with various community projects already in the pipeline or as we can assign the resources to do so:

- Portalito HUB: Palmer is offering an ongoing schedule of educational opportunities, seminars and community meetings with the assistance of our partners. Local middle school students are already using the area for educational activities and planting a medicinal garden.
- A partnership with Vitrina Solidaria has been enacted to foster economic growth in the communities around El Yunque through business acceleration opportunities.
- Limited volunteer projects are available and are being posted online as they become available. Recent projects include creating a classroom area along along one of the trails, and assisting in cleanup efforts in various parts of the Forest and partner reserves such as Elisa Colberg Girl Scout Camp in El Verde and the Northeast Ecological Corridor.
- The Youth Conservation Corps (YCC) is continuing over the summer and is increasing to 15 members from 5 last year where they received the Regional Forester Award for Promoting Recreation for their work on the El Toro Trail.

El Yunque National Forest is firmly on the road to recovery, but it will take time to complete much of the required assessments, planning, reconstruction, and rehabilitation to continue into the future in a more resilient way. Ongoing updates, news and events will be posted on our Facebook and Twitter feeds.