

Camuy River Caves Have \$1.9 Million from FEMA for their Repairs

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The agency allocations will address repairs to parts of the cave system

San Juan, Puerto Rico – The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) has awarded nearly \$1.9 million for two projects aimed at the Camuy River Caves National Park for damage after Hurricane María. The funds allocated to the Department of Natural and Environmental Resources (DNER) will repair its administrative facilities and part of the cave systems; and will address measures to mitigate risks following future atmospheric events.

The Camuy River Caves National Park opened to the public in 1986 and is located in the area known as the Northwest Plateau, due to its large deposits of limestone sedimentary rock.

“Puerto Rico has one of the largest underground rivers in the world, key to the development of the Camuy River Caves, a place with great natural, cultural and educational value. This reconstruction will allow locals and visitors to enjoy this historic structure for many years, while we learn more about the species that inhabit it,” said Federal Disaster Recovery Coordinator José G. Baquero.

Following the repairs, visitors will be able to learn about the various animals that inhabit the caves. Bats are the most prominent among the fauna of the area, according to the deputy superintendent of the Cave Park, Gildaliz Román Bonilla. Of the 13 species on the island, nine of them are found within this cave system. The superintendent explained that bats are an insect control agent and are also the main pollen carrier for many plants, including bananas and plantains.

Aside from its importance as a natural resource, the Camuy River Caves receive an average of 5,000 visitors per month during high season. After its closure due to Hurricane María, the park partially reopened in 2021 with the Clara Cave. Visitors should bring flashlights for the tours, as the excess water that entered the cave from the hurricane submerged and damaged the entire electrical system.



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The first project, with a federal investment of nearly \$507,000, will replace the electrical system of the Clara Cave, as well as the boardwalk and the stairs leading to the Catedral Cave, among other repairs.

Meanwhile, the second project will focus on repairs to the park facilities, which have administrative offices, operational offices and gazebos. With over \$1.3 million, portions of the infrastructure, lighting and electrical system will be replaced. The mitigation measures will reinforce the facilities with storm shutters and tension wires; will waterproof walls and ceilings to prevent leaks due to heavy rain; and install geogrids to mitigate roadway surface loss.

For her part, the secretary of the DNER, Anaís Rodríguez, said that “the allocation of these FEMA funds provides us with the opportunity to revitalize and preserve this natural gem, allowing it to continue being a world-renowned attraction that contributes to the economic growth and prosperity of the area. The Camuy River Caves National Park is an incomparable treasure, and its preservation is of vital importance to our island. Through these efforts, we are committed to ensuring its conservation and to allow present and future generations to enjoy its beauty and uniqueness.”

The executive director of the Central Office for Recovery, Reconstruction and Resiliency (COR3), Manuel A. Laboy Rivera, said that “through this allocation of funds, the DNER will strengthen these facilities and expand the availability of attractions. To initiate these permanent works, the DNER will be able to request from COR3 a first advance available through the Working Capital Advance pilot program, which corresponds to 25 percent of the total obligation of this reconstruction project. Once it demonstrates the use of these funds, it may request a second advance of money until it receives 50 percent of the obligation in advances”.

To date, FEMA has awarded over \$30.5 billion for more than 10,700 Public Assistance projects aimed at rebuilding a Puerto Rico that is more resilient to future weather events. Of these, the DNER already has nearly \$97.1 million for its permanent work projects

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