

Rebuilt Bridges Already Support their Communities' Resilience

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Guaynabo, PUERTO RICO - The towns of Barranquitas, Jayuya, San Sebastián and Villalba have four bridges that were rebuilt with funds from the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and have proven to be resilient by resisting the onslaught of several natural disasters since their repair.

Nearly \$13 million from the agency supported the reconstruction of this infrastructure, where runoff from Hurricane María practically destroyed the original bridges.

To strengthen them and prevent residents from losing access to their communities in the event of future disasters, funding under the agency's Public Assistance Program included over \$8.6 million to address hazard mitigation. This allowed for the redesign and reconstruction of structures — originally low water crossings with integrated culverts — into concrete and steel bridges.

"These projects are a sample of permanent works already completed, where mitigation funds were invested to build improved structures that proved to be more resistant and safer for the residents of these communities," said Federal Disaster Recovery Coordinator José G. Baquero.

One of the municipal bridges transformed by the federal investment is the low water crossing in the Abrahonda sector at the Cibao neighborhood of San Sebastián. FEMA allocated nearly \$5.2 million for this project, as the original structure was destroyed by the strong currents of the Guajataca River during Hurricane María. About \$4.8 million of the total funds were to replace the remaining bridge with an elevated bridge.

The secretary of the Department of Transportation and Public Works (DTOP), Eileen M. Vélez Vega, explained that the mitigation works for this infrastructure have two main objectives: to increase resilience to future natural disasters and to meet the transportation needs of the communities.



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FEMA also allocated funds to repair a low water crossing in the Cerro Gordo sector of the Caonillas Abajo neighborhood in Villalba. FEMA obligated nearly \$2.3 million to rebuild the structure that was destroyed by the continuous rains from Hurricane María.

“This caused an unprecedented emergency by leaving the Cerro Gordo community and adjacent areas cut off from assistance during and after the emergency,” said Orlando J. Negrón García, Villalba municipal secretary. This bridge is used by residents of the communities of Cerro Gordo, La Cruz and Quebrada María sectors of Villalba; and part of the municipality of Coamo that borders this region.

The low water crossing was replaced with a two-lane elevated bridge that allows runoff to flow in the event of heavy rains. Nearly \$1.2 million of the total funds for this project addressed these hazard mitigation measures.

“The new bridge in the Cerro Gordo community resulted in relief and peace of mind for families residing in the area, as they have the certainty that in the event of a future weather event they will be able to access the road and not be cut off,” said Negrón García.

Likewise, a bridge located on state highway PR-770 in Barranquitas was rebuilt to withstand future floods and hurricanes. FEMA allocated over \$3.6 million to DTOP to demolish the concrete low water crossing and over \$2 million of these funds allowed it to be converted into an elevated bridge with a pedestrian sidewalk that allows the natural flow of the Cañabón River.

Finally, over \$1.7 million supported the reconstruction of another low water crossing in the Mameyes neighborhood of Jayuya, which was devastated by runoff from Hurricane Maria. Nearly \$700,000 went specifically to replace the bridge.

The executive director of the Central Office for Recovery, Reconstruction and Resiliency (COR3), Manuel A. Laboy Rivera, said that “thanks to the allocation of these funds and the diligence of the municipalities and the Department of Transportation and Public Works, these roads and bridges were reconstructed, thus making the road infrastructure more resilient. According to the Quarterly Progress Report, which covers the months of January to March 2024, there are



2,358 road reconstruction projects that are in the design acquisition to construction stages and represent a global investment of approximately \$1.2 billion. Meanwhile, 986 others valued at \$170.6 million have been completed.”

To date, FEMA has allocated over \$2.4 billion for more than 3,000 bridge and roadway projects across Puerto Rico.

For more information about Puerto Rico’s recovery, visit fema.gov/disaster/4339, fema.gov/disaster/4473 and recovery.pr. Follow us on our social media at Facebook.com/FEMAPuertoRico, Facebook.com/COR3pr and Twitter @COR3pr.



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