

Antony Tseng: Bringing Two Decades of Experience to the U.S., Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands

Antony Tseng is an environmental engineer with the EPA, a post he's held for 20 years. He also serves as president of AFGE Local 3911, which covers New York, New Jersey, Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands. Antony is cross-trained as an assistant safety officer and was recently deployed to Puerto Rico to participate in EPA's response to the victims of Hurricanes Irma and Maria.

Antony usually works with states to monitor pollution levels for waterways, identify impaired waters, and help states adhere to clean water quality standards. For example, swimming beaches are graded higher for quality standards than a stream or river. When waters are impaired with too many pathogens, Antony and state authorities develop "pollution diet" solutions.

On the Front Line in Puerto Rico

Earlier this year, Antony spent almost three weeks in Puerto Rico as an assistant safety officer and part of the household hazardous waste removal team. His mission was assigned by incident command to assist with safety and help EPA collaborate with other government agencies to collect household hazardous waste. His fluency in Spanish helped him communicate with local residents and once residents got over the skepticism, they were grateful the U.S. EPA was knocking on doors.

"My experience in Puerto Rico was sobering and humbling. We arrived during the holidays as January 6 is Three Kings Day, and the whole island typically celebrates with street music, toys, family time, and happiness. This year was subdued. For the most part, folks are still trying to get by without power."

Antony and his team searched for paint cans, cleaning solvents, oils and other toxins to help residents remove them from the debris-filled homes and neighborhoods. He worked in the command post alongside FEMA, the U.S. Army Corp of Engineers, the U.S. Army Reserve, and other agencies with territory authorities.

They educated residents about hazardous waste and collected batteries, paint, cleaning solvents, oils, propane cylinders, electronic waste, and more for disposal. Antony monitored working conditions for his team in the intense heat and humidity while also keeping the team safe. Antony's feeling about the overall recovery effort in Puerto Rico is muted.

"The pace of the recovery in Puerto Rico is very slow and I don't see a lot of hope that it will quicken any time soon. There are so many cracked telephone poles and large heaps of debris that need clearing, not to mention the homes that need to be repaired and power restored. It's a daunting task, and I'm just glad the EPA has boots on the ground to keep the focus on the future."

Proposed Cuts to the EPA

Secretary Pruitt and President Trump are threatening to cut the EPA staff back to pre-Reagan levels. Antony believes these cuts will jeopardize his ability to do his job well, and this will trickle down to the state level and impact water quality throughout the country.

"The EPA is misunderstood by Americans, sometimes on both sides of the aisle. To some we are environmental cops; to others the EPA is overreaching and overzealous. The EPA only has the power that Congress bestows upon it. We operate under the authority given by the people. I am a public servant, and respect what the law says."