

Environmentalists Alarmed by Puerto Rico Policies ^[1]

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By THE ASSOCIATED PRESS NY Times ^[2] SAN JUAN, Puerto Rico (AP) -- Sweeping from lush mountain rain forests to pristine beaches, a corridor of land protected by Puerto Rico's last governor hosts dozens of rare and endangered species and was championed by celebrities who helped fight off resort proposals. Now new Gov. Luis Fortuno has revoked the reserve as part of a drive to bring jobs and investment for the U.S. territory's struggling economy. And activists see a broader pattern of looser protection for the island's environment. Fortuno's Oct. 30 order allows large-scale development inside the 3,200-acre 1,300-hectare) parcel of land immediately north of El Yunque, the only tropical rain forest in the U.S. National Forest system. Previous Gov. Anibal Acevedo Vila had declared the Northeast Ecological Corridor off-limits to all but small, eco-friendly projects after a preservation campaign backed by actor Benicio del Toro and attorney Robert F. Kennedy Jr. Fortuno also backs legislation that would make it harder for environmental groups to block construction permits and he supports a new coal-fired power plant and garbage facilities that worry environmentalists. "We could be in quite a lot of trouble as an island," said Camilla Feibelman, the Sierra Club's coordinator in Puerto Rico. The Caribbean territory of 4 million people already struggles with overpopulation and the legacy of decades of industrial contamination. Polluted surface water and reservoirs mean Puerto Rico has a tenth as much fresh water per person as the U.S. mainland, according to the Environmental Protection Agency. The island is also dotted with Superfund sites where the EPA is overseeing the cleanup of contaminants. "We have to be a lot more careful than any territory or state in the U.S. with how we use our scarce resources, and we are not doing that," said Abel Vale Nieves, president of the Citizens for the Karst group that promotes protection for sensitive limestone terrain. But spurring

the economy has been Fortuno's top priority since his election last year as the island's first Republican governor in four decades. The 49-year-old former tourism chief faces an unemployment rate that has soared above 16 percent. His office declined to grant an interview but Planning Board president Hector Morales denied Fortuno's policies threaten the environment. "The government of Puerto Rico has been clear about creating a balance between conserving important natural resources and sustainable development," Morales said. Fortuno says most of the northeast corridor will endure as a preserve, and all plans there are on hold while the government evaluates which lands are the most sensitive. But developers recently have pitched hotels, a golf course and a shopping center. Fortuno's policies have encountered little strong political opposition because both houses of the legislature and most of the island's mayorships are controlled by his New Progressive Party, which supports making Puerto Rico a U.S. state. But hundreds have demonstrated against the decision on the Northeast preserve and the governor's approval ratings have dropped sharply since his landslide victory against an incumbent facing a federal indictment on corruption charges. Political analyst Manuel Alvarez-Rivera said some Puerto Ricans believe "Gov. Fortuno is trying to rule as if he is in a state in the U.S. mainland." Environmental groups complain that a bill meant to speed issuance of development permits restricts input from outsiders, making it tougher to halt projects they see as dangerous. Activists also say they are skeptical of a proposed plant to generate power from garbage, most likely by burning it, in the southeastern city of Yabucoa. Ports Authority director Alvaro Pilar said it could process waste imported from other Caribbean islands and he said the government is pursuing as many as five such plants, which are common on the U.S. mainland. He said they would help the island cope with a solid waste crisis and said the idea will eventually win over critics concerned about the risk of contamination and the island's tourism image. "At the end of the day, the electricity and savings are going to be enjoyed by the Puerto Rican people," he said.

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