

Balloons to help restore Puerto Rico's cell networks

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People use their cell phones in one of the few places with signal in San Juan, Puerto Rico. 83 per cent of cell sites were still out of service over two weeks after Hurricane Maria hit

Google's parent company is set to launch balloons into the Caribbean skies in an attempt to restore telephone networks in hurricane-ravaged Puerto Rico.

Alphabet Inc., which controls Google, obtained authorization from the US Federal Communications Commission (FCC) to deploy the devices—developed from 2013 as part of a project known as "Loon."

It aims to temporarily re-establish Puerto Rico's cellular network—where 83 per cent of cell sites were still out of service Friday, according to FCC figures.

"More than two weeks after Hurricane Maria struck, millions of Puerto Ricans are still without access to much-needed communications services," FCC chairman Ajit Pai said in a statement.

"That's why we need to take innovative approaches to help restore connectivity on the island," he added, urging wireless carriers to "cooperate with Project Loon to maximize this effort's chances of success."

Loon, part of a series of futuristic projects out of Alphabet's "X" laboratory, was originally created to provide internet coverage in under-developed rural areas.

A similar project using drones was closed down in 2016.

The balloons are sent 12 miles (20 kilometers) above the Earth's surface, where they can remain autonomously for over 100 days. They are made from a polyethylene canvas the size of a tennis court.

Initially designed to drift, the balloons are now equipped with navigation systems, powered by solar panels, which keep them in a specific area.

The announcement comes after electric carmaker Tesla said it could help restore electricity to Puerto Rico using [solar panels](#) and batteries.

Responding to a tweet asking if Tesla could help, chief executive Elon Musk answered: "The Tesla team has done this for many smaller islands around the world, but there is no scalability limit, so it can be done for Puerto Rico too."

Puerto Rico Governor Ricardo Rosello joined the conversation, tweeting to Musk: "Let's talk. Do you want to show the world the power and scalability of your #TeslaTechnologies? PR could be that flagship [project](#)."

Tesla and Musk have for years been seeking to push the auto industry to electric to reduce the use of fossil fuels, and more recently have introduced residential and commercial solar batteries which can operate off the [electric power grid](#).

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