



Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands

Department of Lands and Natural Resources

Lower Base, Caller Box 10007
Saipan, MP 96950
Tel: 670-322-9834 Fax: 670-322-2633



February 21, 2020

Representative Jared Huffman
WASHINGTON, DC OFFICE
1527 Longworth House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515
(202) 225-5161

Honorable Congressman Huffman,

My name is Anthony Benavente and I am the Secretary of the Department of Lands and Natural Resources for the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands. I am deeply humbled at your invitation to join this panel discussion today and regret that I was not able to physically attend. However, I wish to provide this opening statement that I hope will be read in my place.

Then Northern Mariana Islands includes 14 islands running in a north - south direction for 500 miles. The three inhabited islands support approximately 54,000 residents; the same size as a medium town in the US mainland. There are two recognized indigenous groups in the CNMI; the Chamorro's, the original descendants and the Refaluwash who arrived during the mid-1800's from the Caroline Islands.

The CNMI's EEZ is second to Hawaii in area and comprises approximately 13% of the total management area under the Western Pacific Council. Our ocean area is over 3,800 times our land mass. Although our population and fisheries are very small when compared to the US mainland, a majority of the fishing vessels in the CNMI are 15 to 25 feet fiberglass boats with outboard motors. Fish are mainly sold locally, with minimal exports. Despite these perceived shortcomings, we have immense pride with our local fishers who provide our tourists and residents with fresh seafood products. Pacific Island heritage and culture has intimately tied our people with the ocean for thousands of years. Often times funding for our fishery related management efforts are overlooked as they are deemed unimportant in the eyes of mainland management agencies who regularly engage with the more noticeable large scale fisheries located along the East, Gulf, and West Coasts.

Overall, we believe the MSA is working well and does not require any significant changes. The CNMI is very supportive of the bottom-up approach in managing fisheries as all stakeholders and interested residents have a chance to participate. Additional input is channeled to the Council through the numerous advisory bodies overseen by the Council.

I wished to make a couple of points with respect to MSA:

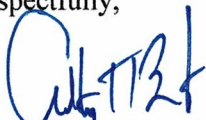
- We would support a clearer definition of overfished. The present use of the term infers that fishing activities are the only cause of an overfished stock. As we now realize, there are other underlying factors, such as climate change, recruitment failure, pollution, etc. that also play a role in determining the stock status. Perhaps the term depleted would be a more appropriate term.
- We support giving the Council's the ability to have maximum flexibility in managing those species under their jurisdiction. For example, having arbitrary and hard-fast requirements, such as specific time periods for rebuilding an overfished stock can have unintended consequences. Each

Council should be able to address stock rebuilding effort based on life history parameters and the impacts to fishing communities. Each Council faces an entirely different set of circumstances related to their fisheries and the Council is the best entity to decide the best approach to resolving their fishery problems. Fishing communities and businesses are very fragile and once they are regulated out of business, it is extremely difficult to re-open once the regulatory environment is again favorable for their operations.

- The CNMI has been able to leverage funds from the Western Pacific Sustainable Fisheries Fund to implement those approved projects in the CNMI Marine Conservation Plan. Some examples of successful projects include:
 - Garapan Fishing Base Launching Ramp Boat Trailer Parking Lot.
 - Garapan Public Market Ice Machine
 - Design of Garapan Fishing Base Improvement Project
 - Bottomfish Fishing Training
 - Mandatory Fishery Data Reporting Technical Assistance
 - Lease of Bottomfish Training Vessel
 - MCP - Community Grant projects
 - Island Creel Survey Projects
- Through the MSA and Council efforts, the CNMI has received an increase in support for improved fishery data collection efforts and policy improvements. Identifying the specific needs for the Western Pacific insular areas is difficult as each area presents a unique set of both logistical and cultural challenges. I believe the Council has had good success in working with the differing island communities and helping them resolve management issues.
- The recently prepared bottomfish stock assessments for the island areas has raised serious concerns on data quality and reliability. In response, the Council and Pacific Islands Fisheries Science Center has refocused research efforts on bottomfish MUS. The data quality concern has also spilled over to several of our pelagic MUS species. MSA has allowed the responsible agencies to address management shortfalls, however funding is required to adequately carry out the actions as required by MSA.
- Despite the successes of the MSA in the Western Pacific, the Council has also had to deal with extraneous conservation efforts that complicates the management decision making process, as well as hurts US fishing communities and fishers. An example is the unilateral designation of numerous National Marine Monuments throughout the Western Pacific region. These no-fishing spatial closures result in significantly decreasing available fishing areas while completely ignoring the volume of fish landed or decreasing fishing effort – the real parameters that go into determining whether certain fish stocks are overfished or experiencing overfishing. An example that hurt Hawaii fishers was the recently passed law that prohibits the importation of sustainably harvested billfish from the Western Pacific into the US mainland. Another example is the current legislation passed by the House that would prohibit the sale of shark fins from sustainably caught

sharks, thus affecting the livelihood. Neither of these examples have a realized conservation benefit.

Respectfully,



ANTHONY T. BENAVENTE

Secretary for the Department of Lands and Natural Resources

CC: Ralph DLG Torres, CNMI Governor
Arnold I. Palacios, CNMI Lt. Governor
Washington Delegate, Gregorio" Kilili" Camacho Sablan
Kitty Simonds, Executive Director WPRFMC