

## DFW backs resolution against designation of coral critical habitat in CNMI

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Emmanuel T. Erediano | For The Guam Daily Post

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SAIPAN – Division of Fish and Wildlife Director Manny Pangelinan testified in the House of Representatives on Tuesday in support of House Joint Resolution 22-2, which opposes the proposal of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration-National Marine Fisheries Service to designate certain areas as critical habitats for threatened corals in U.S. waters.

Among these areas are the near-shore waters surrounding Rota, Aguijan, Tinian and Tatsumi Reef, Saipan and Garapan Bank, Farallon de Medinilla, Anatahan, Pagan and Maug.

The National Marine Fisheries Service, or NMFS, stated in the Federal Register that comments regarding the proposal must be received by Jan. 26.

In response, Department of Lands and Natural Resources Secretary Anthony Benavente asked the NOAA to conduct public hearings on Tinian, Saipan and Rota; extend the comment period for another 60 days; and provide detailed critical habitat boundaries on nautical charts with maps available for public review a minimum of 30 days before the end of the comment period.

Gov. Ralph Torres, Guam Gov. Lou Leon Guerrero and American Samoa Gov. Lemanu Mauga also asked the federal agency for 90 days to comment on the proposed designation of critical habitat.

Authored by Vice Speaker Blas Jonathan Attao, H.J.R. 22-2 expresses full support for the DLNR secretary's requests.

Pangelinan, in his testimony, told House members that the NMFS "did a poor job" in putting together a proposal to designate critical habitat.

The map for the critical habitat, he added, was done in an "overzealous manner, which does not consider to exclude areas such sea grass, managed areas" surrounding the CNMI.

He believes that the process should be approached with best management practice.

Pangelinan also said there are already many laws and regulations that provide for the protection and conservation of coral and its habitat.

"To act in such a haste without giving everyone the opportunity to review the five-year status and contemplate what would be the appropriate approach would be counterproductive," he added.