


“Lack of diversity is the enemy of success” – Secretary of Commerce, Gina Raimondo



On Jan. 14, 2022, Secretary Gina Raimondo held the Department of Commerce's first Equity Town Hall. She said prioritizing equity work is “not just because it's the right thing to do, although that is primarily the most important reason to care about equity and inclusivity and equal opportunity, but frankly it's good for our economy, homogeneity discrimination, lack of diversity is the enemy of success. America's diversity is a competitive advantage—but only if we give everyone an opportunity to fulfill their potential and fully participate. That means women, people of color, and people who live in rural areas, on tribal lands, and in underserved communities.”

Secretary Raimondo emphasized the DOC's overall priority is to help build an economic system that works for all. Among the new equity guiding principles is a commitment to make DOC's programs, services, personnel and data accessible to underserved communities by changing how the federal government structures their products and works with grassroots partners. One particularly interesting example discussed at the town hall is that NOAA will incorporate takeaways to improve their climate services following a series of Climate and Equity Roundtables with underserved communities.

Secretary Raimondo said that equity will be at the heart of the DOC's priorities, including using new and existing programs to drive equitable, place-based growth through the Economic Development Administration's (EDA) Build Back Better Regional Challenge. The program aims to transform communities throughout the country, making employer-driven investments in the U.S. workforce through the Good Jobs Challenge so that all Americans have a path into a high-quality career. The secretary also mentioned the Minority Business Development Agency that fosters the growth of women- and minority-owned businesses and supports small-business owners in underserved communities. Both agencies have grant opportunities and, given their priorities, our regional fishing communities may be able to apply for additional resources.

Characterizing our Underserved Communities

The U.S. Census Bureau is modeling the poverty levels of our communities at the county level and tracking where these levels concentrate over time. This work directly informs EDA's programmatic needs to better identify successful economic development treatments for improving poverty. It's anticipated that the Bureau's poverty estimates could inform research and measure the impact of EDA's investments for underserved communities in the coming years.

A key fundamental barrier for U.S. Territories is that not all of the Bureau's data are current for the regions. The agency's new Climate and Economic Justice Screening Tool states that for American Samoa and the Northern Mariana Islands, the

data used to identify disadvantaged communities are from the 2010 Decennial Census. For Guam, work is currently underway to identify disadvantaged communities and update the tool accordingly.

Closer to home, the NOAA Pacific Islands Fisheries Science Center (PIFSC) has an extensive collection of regional census data compiled (2005-2020) to support its social vulnerability indicators initiative. PIFSC has a few publications that apply its methodologies to describe social vulnerability (environmental justice, economic, gentrification pressure) for communities across the region. PIFSC also created online fishing community snapshots compiling community demographics and involvement in fisheries. Poverty levels are included with national comparisons. Economically challenged coastal communities rely heavily on marine resources. More than 75% of communities in the Western Pacific Region identify as indigenous, Asian American or Pacific Islander. We generally have higher poverty values and lower median income values than the national average. For example, using the PIFSC tool for Hilo, HI, the percentage of families below the poverty level is 12%, slightly above the national average of 11.3%.

It appears our federal agencies are poised to tactically deliver resources to underserved communities in a way that self-evaluates how effectively community needs are met. It's a good start. 🐟



Secretary Raimondo's recent remarks included ways the federal government is increasing opportunities for rural communities, like this one in the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands.

Resources:

The PIFSC Hilo Community Snapshot example: <https://apps-nefsc.fisheries.noaa.gov/read/socialsci/pifsc/createReport.php?state=HI&island=Hawaii&community=Hilo>

EDA Resource Directory: www.eda.gov/resources/directory

Minority Business Development Agency (Pacific office): www.mbda.gov/business-center/hawaii-mbda-business-center

Kleiber D, Kotowicz D, Hospital J. 2018. Applying national community social vulnerability indicators to fishing communities in the Pacific Island region. U.S. Dept. of Commerce, NOAA Technical Memorandum NOAA-TM-NMFS-PIFSC-65, 63 p. <https://doi.org/10.7289/V5/TM-PIFSC-65>.

Hospital J, Leong K. 2021. Community Participation in Hawai'i Commercial Fisheries. U.S. Dept. of Commerce, NOAA Technical Memorandum NOAA-TM-NMFS-PIFSC-89, 213 p. <https://doi.org/10.25923/p4aj-k323>.