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STATEMENT
BY
THE HONORABLE BILL CASSIDY (R-LA)
AT

THE SUBCOMMITTEE ON INSULAR AFFAIRS, OCEANS AND WILDLIFE LEGISLATIVE HEARING ON
H.R. 4339 and H.R. 6015
SEPTEMBER 16, 2010

Good morning, Madam Chairwoman. Today's legislative hearing will review two bills – H.R. 4339, introduced by Mr. Sablan, and H.R. 6015, introduced by you, Madam Chairwoman.

H.R. 4339 would create a fellowship program for qualified Northern Mariana Islands students. The students would have an opportunity to participate in a local or a federal government fellowship for a semester or a summer. The program would be managed by the Secretary of the Interior and it would include local and federal agencies that have agreed to support the development of the students. The federal government would pay for this new fellowship program, through an annual appropriation. In the first year, \$1 million would be authorized, and "such sums as may be necessary" would be authorized every future years.

I look forward to hearing the witnesses' views on this bill to understand the need for this program and why the taxpayers should be paying for it.

The other bill, H.R. 6015, addresses two different issues. First, it would require the Bureau of Economic Analysis of the Department of Commerce to publish certain economic data for territories. The Department of the Interior contracted with the B.E.A. over the last two fiscal years to get GDP data for the territories in order to better understand and determine the economic progress being made by each territory. Prior to the contract, Interior did not have this type of economic data for these areas. I am interested to hear if the Administration supports this provision.

Secondly, the bill would make two clarifications to the Consolidated Natural Resources Act of 2008. This Act required the application of federal immigration laws to the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands and included a transition period to minimize any adverse impacts to the Commonwealth's economy.

The intent of the transition period was to slowly phase-out the non-resident guest worker program established by the Commonwealth and exempt both Guam and the Commonwealth, during the 5-year transition period, from the statutory limitations on non-immigrant worker visas.

The Secretary of Homeland Security interprets this law to allow for a five-year extension of the Commonwealth's non-resident guest worker program, but does not interpret the law to allow for an extension of the exemption for the numerical limitations on worker visas. H.R. 6015 would clarify that the work visa exemption should be extended for 5 years if the Secretary also extends the Commonwealth's nonresident guest worker program.

Lastly, H.R. 6015 would authorize the Secretary of Homeland Security to use an 'alternative procedure' to allow tourists from China and Russia into the Commonwealth and Guam.

The Consolidated Natural Resources Act created the Guam and Northern Mariana Islands visa waiver program, and the intent of the program was to allow tourists from approved countries to enter the Commonwealth or Guam for periods up to 45 days.

The Secretary of Homeland Security issued an interim rule for the program and did not include Russia and China, even though these countries have provided significant economic benefits to the region.

To date, the Secretary has not issued a final rule. But in October 2009, she exercised her parole authority to allow tourists from China and Russia into the Commonwealth on a case-by-case basis. This has created a disparity in the visa waiver program, since the parole authority is not available in Guam. The visa waiver program was created to treat Guam and the Commonwealth equally.

I look forward to hearing from our witnesses regarding their views on the proposed legislation. Thank you, Madam Chair.