

**Testimony of
Togiola T.A. Tulafono
Governor of American Samoa
and Member, U.S. Coral Reef Task Force**

**Before the Subcommittee on Insular Affairs, Oceans and Wildlife
House Natural Resources Committee
U.S. House of Representatives**

**Hearing on H.R. 860, *Coral Reef Conservation Act Reauthorization and Enhancement
Amendments of 2009***

To Reauthorize the Coral Reef Conservation Act of 2000

February 25, 2009

Talofa and Greetings from American Samoa.

Chairwoman Bordallo, Ranking Member Henry Brown, and Distinguished Members of the Subcommittee: I am Togiola Tulafono, and I would like to thank you for this opportunity to testify on behalf of the people of American Samoa and the U.S. All Islands Coral Reef Committee (AIC), and as a member of the United States Coral Reef Task Force, in support of the reauthorization of the Coral Reef Conservation Act of 2000.

The seven jurisdictions who are members of the AIC include the Pacific Ocean islands of American Samoa, the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands, Guam, and the State of Hawai'i. In the Caribbean, members include the State of Florida, Commonwealth of Puerto Rico and the US Virgin Islands. Affiliate members of the Committee are the Federated States of Micronesia, Republic of the Marshall Islands and the Republic of Palau. These jurisdictions include large marine areas in the Pacific and the Caribbean oceans and these jurisdictions have direct responsibility for managing most of the coral reefs in this country.

Our coral reefs are essential resources for our islands. Our primary consideration must be to restore and protect our coral reef ecosystems for the benefit of the people who depend on these precious resources economically, ecologically and culturally.

The Importance of Coral Reefs

Coral reefs are among the most diverse, biologically complex and valuable ecosystems on Earth. Often called rainforests of the sea, coral reefs provide economic and environmental services to millions of people as valuable areas of natural beauty, sources of food, jobs and revenues, recreation and tourism, medicine, cultural activities and shoreline protection.

The United States has a significant national interest in protecting its coral reef ecosystems. The area of coral ecosystems within 10 fathom and 100 fathom depth contours in tropical and subtropical waters of the United States is 36,813 sq km and 143,059 sq km (Rohmann et al, 2005). The vast majority of U.S. coral reefs making up the referenced areas are within State, territorial and commonwealth waters.

Fifty percent of species in federal fisheries depend on coral reef ecosystems and coral reefs provide economic goods and services worth about \$375 billion (*check figure*) each year to millions of people. In American Samoa alone, coral reefs have been estimated to contribute approximately \$10 million in benefits to local residents and visitors annually.

However, coral reefs are in peril. The world's coral reefs are seriously threatened by over-exploitation, pollution, habitat destruction, invasive species, disease, bleaching, over population and global climate change. The rapid decline of these ancient, complex and biologically diverse marine ecosystems is well documented and has significant social, economic and ecological impacts in our jurisdictions, nationally and globally.

By 2005, an estimated 25 percent of the world's reefs had been lost to a variety of human activities. The growing number of anthropogenic threats that have been identified include: shoreline development, polluted runoff from agricultural and land-use practices (including sedimentation and nutrients), over-fishing and over-exploitation, destructive fishing practices, dredging and shoreline modification, vessel groundings and anchoring, disease outbreaks, population pressure, aquatic invasive species and global climate change (including coral bleaching and ocean acidification). These threats have been compounded by a lack of awareness and appreciation for coral reefs at local, national and international levels. It is estimated that an additional 32 percent of the world's coral reefs are now seriously threatened.

Marine Monuments

I am very pleased that early this year, President Bush designated three remote Pacific Ocean regions as marine national monuments: the Rose Atoll Marine National Monument in American Samoa, the Marianas Trench Marine National Monument, and the Pacific Remote Islands Marine National Monument. The designation has added federal protection to nearly 200,000 (195,280) square miles of high seas. Combined with the Papahānaumokuākea Marine National Monument in Hawai'i designated in 2006, these designations represent the largest protected area in the world if they are properly managed and enforced.

Designation of these national monuments ensures that the marine environment will receive the highest level of environmental recognition and conservation. Destruction or extraction of protected resources within the boundaries of these monuments will be prohibited, as will commercial fishing in the coral reef ecosystem areas of the monuments and their surrounding deep waters. Scientific and recreational activities may be permitted consistent with the care and management of the protected resources of these monuments. For marine life and seabirds, these places will be sanctuaries to grow and thrive. These locations are truly among the last pristine areas in the marine environment on Earth and I fully respect and support their protection.

The Rose Atoll Marine National Monument protects the pristine coral reef ecosystem around a remote part of American Samoa. One of its most striking features is the pink hue of fringing reef caused by the dominance of reef building coralline algae. Rare species of nesting petrel, shearwaters, and terns also thrive on this little island, and the waters surrounding it are a home for many species depleted elsewhere in the world, including giant clams, reef sharks, and sea turtles.

The Pacific Remote Islands Marine National Monument area consists of Wake, Baker, Howland, and Jarvis Islands, Johnston Atoll, Kingman Reef, and Palmyra Atoll, which lie to the south and west of Hawaii. With the exception of Wake Island, these islands are administered as National Wildlife Refuges by the United States Fish and Wildlife Service of the Department of the Interior. These refuges are an important part of the most widespread collection of marine-and terrestrial-life protected areas on the planet under a single country's jurisdiction. They sustain many endemic species including corals, fish, shellfish, marine mammals, seabirds, water birds, land birds, insects, and vegetation not found elsewhere.

While I am pleased with these monument designations, I am concerned that the Department of the Interior's (DOI) role in the current Act is inadequate. I believe DOI's role should be increased to enable the department to carry out their increased management activities. DOI has the largest coral reef conservation role in the U.S. government through their management responsibility for coral reef holdings on behalf of the Nation. DOI's Office of Insular Affairs, National Park Service, USGS, and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service all have coral reef conservation responsibilities that their current level of funding does not nearly support. DOI needs additional funding for their coral reef programs which will also benefit the jurisdictions. Enforcement of protective laws in these very remote locations will require technical innovations and new strategies. Without effective enforcement, these designations would remain just paper parks with no real effects on protecting the reefs themselves. Effective enforcement will be challenging, but is absolutely essential to the success of these designations. Increased funding will go a long way towards enhancing our enforcement efforts, and, consequently, will improve the condition of our natural resources.

Climate Change

I have been very concerned about the impacts of climate change for several years. Previously, I have called on the U.S. Coral Reef Task Force to urgently address the threat of climate change to coral reef ecosystems and to move forward to implement resolutions. We now have key, up-to-date scientific findings about the condition of coral reefs around the world from the 11th International Coral Reef Symposium held in Florida in 2008 which include the following:

- Coral cover in many locations remains low and is not recovering. This is especially true in areas that have experienced severe bleaching tied to increased seawater temperatures.
- Ocean acidification and ocean warming can be thought of as the 'evil twins' of climate change. At the present rate of carbon dioxide emissions we have 8-10 years to turn things around before it is too late.
- It is now known that ocean acidification reduces the ability of coral larvae and coralline algae to successfully settle and grow, which will negatively affect the ability of degraded reefs to recover.

We acknowledge the need to address climate change by supporting a range of efforts, including strategies to reduce greenhouse gas emissions that significantly contribute to climate change and ocean acidification.

I am pleased to see climate change listed as one of the threats to coral reef ecosystems in the bill, however, I would suggest we add ocean acidification as well.

Current work

All the coral jurisdictions, in partnership with NOAA, the Department of Interior, and other federal agencies, have developed and implemented Local Action Strategies (LAS) over the last four years to address threats to our Nation's coral reef ecosystems. The jurisdictions have implemented over 490 projects designed to reduce damaging human-caused impacts. In this process we have engaged a range of federal, local, non-governmental and academic organizations and stakeholders, and the states and territories have successfully leveraged volunteer services and in-kind resources by a rate of nearly three dollars for every federal dollar.

However, there is much more to be done. As the recent external review of the NOAA CRI programs concluded, we are doing many excellent things, and yet the reefs continue to decline. Our biggest challenge is the need for additional funding and resources to complete the proposed projects identified in the LAS's. Approximately \$37 million dollars, over 50 percent of the total cost for implementing these projects is still needed, and we all recognize the need to not only maintain these existing efforts but greatly expand them in the future. Another challenge is the limited capacity of local agencies to manage the wide range of activities that impact our coral reefs, particularly in the territorial and commonwealth jurisdictions. While the LAS's underway are extensive, they do not fully encompass the range of activities needed to address all threats to coral reefs. If our goal is to not only reverse the decline of coral reefs but to rebuild these valuable ecosystems, we must expand our efforts to more fully encompass the management challenges in each jurisdiction.

Bill H.R.860

Given the importance of coral reefs, the growing threats, and the work yet to be done to protect these magnificent ecosystems, it is absolutely imperative that Congress reauthorize and strengthen the Coral Reef Conservation Act.

We encourage more active engagement by ALL federal agencies in the implementation of each jurisdiction's coral reef management priorities and in the development of their own coral reef conservation implementation plans

We appreciate the quick action taken by Chairwoman Bordallo, Congressman Faleomavaega, Congresswoman Christensen, and Congressman Abercrombie and Congresswoman Hirono to introduce and sponsor H.R. 860, "*Coral Reef Conservation Act Reauthorization and Enhancement Amendments of 2009*."

In particular, we thank the Representatives for including appropriations for the Office of Insular Affairs in the Department of the Interior and for authorizing the NOAA Administrator to take action to prevent or minimize impacts from vessel groundings.

Authorization of Appropriations – Section 108

We support Section 108 which authorizes increases in appropriations to \$35 million (by 2013) for the Secretary of Commerce (NOAA), \$8 million for community-based planning grants, and

\$5 million for the Department of the Interior. However, we request that the authorization for DOI be increased to \$10 million. These appropriations will provide much needed resources for the agencies, states, territories and commonwealths to implement the national coral reef action plan developed under the Act and to support implementation of local action strategies to conserve coral reefs. Considering coral reefs are some of the most biologically important and most endangered marine ecosystems, this is an important investment to make to protect not only our nation's coral reefs, but the associated economic and cultural benefits as well.

International Coral Reef Conservation Program – Section 213

We support this section which authorizes NOAA to establish an International Coral Reef Conservation Program to carry out activities with respect to coral reef ecosystems in waters outside U.S. jurisdiction. We feel an international program will be a worthwhile concept, the seven U.S. jurisdictions and three Freely Associated States still have pressing coral reef conservation and management needs and priorities which need to be addressed however links must also be made where possible for mutual benefit on international collaboration.

Title II – United States Coral Reef Task Force

We fully support this Title which establishes the Task Force to lead, coordinate and strengthen Federal Government actions to better preserve and protect coral reef ecosystems. We recognize the significant work that is being carried out by the Task Force and strongly support the continuation of this important initiative.

Recommendations

While I believe this bill does strengthen the current Act, I wish to make recommendations that I believe will improve the Act's effectiveness even more. While my colleagues may have other suggestions, I submit the following recommendations to improve H.R. 860:

- Add “ocean acidification” after “climate change” (page 8, line 19)
- Remove Section 213 (International Coral Reef Conservation Program) from the bill and give priority to the coral programs of the U.S. jurisdictions, the Freely Associated States and the U.S. Insular Possessions to fund their coral reef ecosystem restoration, education, protection and management priorities.
- Amend the Act so the Department of the Interior (DOI) has a more prominent role in the Act, and increase the appropriation to DOI for an authorization of no less than \$10 million per year to implement it's coral reef ecosystem management responsibilities.

In conclusion, I hope this testimony will be useful to assist you with the re-authorization of the Coral Reef Conservation Act. I appreciate this opportunity to provide testimony on this important bill and we look forward to continue working with you on H.R.860. We appreciate your support to help us stop the decline of these magnificent resources and to achieve the goal of sustainable coral reef management. Our people, communities, cultures and economies are depending on it.

I would be pleased to answer any questions that you, or others on the Subcommittee, may have.