

INSULAR AREAS

February 2020

The Natural Resources Committee has jurisdiction over the U.S.-affiliated insular areas, which include the territories of Puerto Rico, Guam, American Samoa, the U.S. Virgin Islands (USVI), and the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands (CNMI). Residents of the territories are U.S. citizens or nationals. The Committee also has jurisdiction over the freely associated states (FAS) of the Federated States of Micronesia, the Republic of the Marshall Islands (RMI), and the Republic of Palau under the Compacts of Free Association.

Insular areas face serious economic challenges stemming from heavy dependence on only a few key industries, scarce natural resources, shortages of skilled labor, and reliance on federal grants to fund basic services, to name a few. Insular areas are also experiencing climate change threats that require effective federal policies, resources, and programs.

HOW DOES THIS IMPACT AMERICANS?

Strategic Importance: FAS have long supported U.S. national security strategy and diplomacy. The U.S. military regularly conducts intercontinental ballistic missile testing and space surveillance activities from the U.S. Army Kwajalein Missile Range (Ronald Reagan Ballistic Missile Test Site), which is located in the RMI.

Other insular areas hold strategic military importance as well. For example, Guam is a linchpin of the U.S. strategy to assert influence in the Pacific. The U.S. military already occupies a quarter of the land on Guam with a Navy base, submarine docks, and an Air Force base. The U.S. Department of Defense is looking at Guam and CNMI to create space for large-scale operations involving every branch of the U.S. military.

Economic Challenges: All the territories face serious economic challenges and high debt loads because Congress has failed to replace outdated incentives that were necessary for economic growth. Relatedly, because the islands are not eligible for full funding under federal health care programs, their government resources are drained from the high cost of health care for their residents. If action isn't taken to address these concerns, each of the territories could face potential fiscal collapse.

Climate Change: Insular areas are at the frontline when it comes to experiencing the effects of climate change, including extreme climate events and coastal erosion. In 2017, Hurricanes Maria and Irma impacted Puerto Rico and USVI, causing billions of dollars in damages and an unprecedented number of deaths from natural disasters. Similarly, in 2018, Super Typhoon Yutu caused massive destruction in CNMI.

Territorial residents volunteer and die during military service at higher rates than any other jurisdiction of the U.S. Guam has a casualty rate for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan

four times

the national rate.

In addition, according to the U.S. Army, American Samoa was the United States'

number one

recruitment post.

HOW DO WE MOVE FORWARD?

Congress needs to remember that promises were made to ensure both the economic and social well-being of U.S.-affiliated insular areas. We need to prioritize addressing the needs of these areas out of respect for their rights and contributions to our nation.

House Democrats are committed to addressing issues that pertain to the territories as they arise, including inequities in funding for federal programs, shoring up the economic health of the insular areas, or protecting our common military interests.



NATURAL RESOURCES
COMMITTEE
CHAIR RAÚL M. GRIJALVA
NATURALRESOURCES.HOUSE.GOV