

Committee on Resources

Witness Statement

**TESTIMONY OF FERDINAND ARANZA
DIRECTOR OF THE OFFICE OF INSULAR AFFAIRS
THE DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
BEFORE THE COMMITTEE ON RESOURCES
JULY 12, 2000**

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee on Resources, I am pleased to be here today to help clear up misunderstandings on the role of the Office of Insular Affairs (OIA) in ethics issues that were the subject of this Committee's subpoenas.

Mr. Chairman, I share the concerns of this panel about the allegations of improper political activities. This matter is under investigation by the Department of the Interior's Office of the Inspector General (OIG) and the Office of Personnel Management, in addition to your own efforts to review the facts. The Interior Department is cooperating with each of these investigations. I am an advocate of vigorous investigation. I understand the OIG is appearing before you today and I will defer to them as to any information on results of their investigation.

While the government of the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands (CNMI) and this Administration disagree on the appropriate means for addressing the CNMI's labor and immigration problems, it is important to note that the Office of Insular Affairs remains committed to working closely and cooperatively with the CNMI and this Committee to advance mutually beneficial objectives. For example, my office continues to work closely with Governor Pedro P. Tenorio on a wide range of vital issues including the removal of PCB's from Saipan, Y2K, saving coral reefs and seeking additional air service for the Commonwealth.

The Interior Department does not condone or tolerate illegal activities of any kind. There are Interior Department safeguards in place to enforce Federal laws aimed at preventing unethical and improper political activities in the workplace. The Office of Government Ethics (OGE) has found Interior's Ethics program to be in compliance with the OGE regulatory requirements. Specifically, Interior is in compliance with the OGE requirements that every employee receive ethics information within one month of hiring, and thereafter receive ethics training on an annual basis. This annual training covers OGE's standards of conduct regulations as well as the Hatch Act.

In early June, when I became Director of OIA, I made sure that all those employed at OIA received their annual ethics training. Shortly thereafter, every OIA employee received a specialized ethics briefing on the Hatch Act and lobbying activities. Following those sessions, I encouraged all OIA employees to participate in a Department-wide ethics course. Finally, the entire office participated in a Records Management and document production workshop.

Mr. Chairman, let me close my statement by saying that the Office of Insular Affairs is proud of our Federally mandated mission to aid in developing more efficient and effective government in the insular areas. As with any organization, we strive to do this job with the highest degree of professionalism. Anything that limits our effectiveness to work with our fellow Americans in the insular areas is the last thing anyone in my office would ever want.

We continue to work closely with the CNMI. We continue to believe that Federal legislative efforts on the CNMI should focus on the resolution of ongoing immigration, labor and law enforcement problems and policies. We urge passage of important legislation now being considered by the Congress that addresses these issues.

I stand ready to respond to any questions you may have.