

Testimony of

Benigno R. Fitial
Governor of the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands

Before the

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

Hearing on

H.R. 3511, *Marianas Trench Marine National Monument Visitor Facility*
Authorization Act of 2009

and

H.R. 4493, *Marianas Trench Marine National Monument Management*
Enhancement Act of 2010

February 25, 2010

Greetings

Chairwoman Bordallo, and Distinguished Members of the Subcommittee: My name is Benigno R. Fitial, and I am the elected Governor of the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands (CNMI) I thank you for this opportunity to testify on behalf of the people of the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands, on both H.R. 3511 and H.R. 4493. Each of these resolutions focuses on the funding and construction of a visitors and science center for the Marianas Trench Marine National Monument wherein H.R. 3511 designates the CNMI as the recipient of the visitor and science center, while H.R. 4493 identifies the Territory of Guam.

Today, I come before you to clarify why the visitor and science center should be constructed in the CNMI.

A visitor's center has been the subject of much community discussion in the CNMI since early 2008 when the idea for a marine monument was first introduced. During latter 2008, I formed a non-partisan negotiating team that consisted of myself, former Senate President Pete Reyes and former House Speaker Arnold Palacios to work closely with White House representative - the Council on Environmental Quality - in arriving at a mutually agreeable monument Proclamation. The Marianas monument negotiation phase lasted through December 2008 and was very contentious. One result of our

negotiations was the acceptance of CEQ's offer for a visitor and science center that would be provided to the people of the CNMI in return for our support of a marine monument in the CNMI.

In the early part of May 2009, I wrote to Department of Interior Secretary Salazar to express my concern over the lack of action with respect to the planning and funding of the Marianas Monument visitor center. I relayed to the Secretary that the Council on Environmental Quality made it very clear to us that a visitor center was a fundamental part of the Marianas Monument and that it would be federally funded and constructed in the CNMI.

Two months after my letter to Secretary Salazar, CNMI's Representative Gregorio C. Sablan submitted H.R. 3511 which sought to authorize the construction of a visitor and science center in the CNMI. Unfortunately, no significant progress has been made to date.

Fulfilling the promise

It must be made clear that a visitor and science center was negotiated and promised to the CNMI in return for our support of the Marianas Monument. While I certainly hope that both the CNMI and Guam will ultimately have visitor and science centers, I firmly believe that is incumbent upon the federal Government to honor its negotiated obligation to the CNMI with all due respect and fairness for the people of the CNMI.

The Proclamation itself calls for consultation with the CNMI government for the management and planning of the monument. It also specifically provides for *"a program to assess and promote monument-related scientific exploration and research, tourism, and recreational and economic activities and opportunities in the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands."*

Furthermore, I also believe it is entirely appropriate to include specific deadlines in future legislation to ensure this project moves forward in an expeditious manner. I also encourage the subcommittee to consider including language that requires the completion of an engineering design by 2012 and construction by 2013. The inclusion of these details is important to show without further question, the federal government's efforts to bring forth results on their promises to the people of the CNMI.

Marianas Monument Advisory Council

The Proclamation also requires the Secretaries to establish a Marianas Monument Advisory Council to provide advice and recommendations on the development of management plans and management of the monument. The Council is to include at a minimum, three officials of the CNMI government and one representative each from the Department of Defense and the U.S. Coast Guard.

The CNMI supports Guam's inclusion as a member of the Monument Advisory Council. Guam was perhaps inadvertently left out of and not mentioned in the Proclamation because Guam did not participate in the negotiating phase and probably because time and the need for further negotiations had run out. The Marianas Trench Marine National Monument is truly an archipelagic treasure that belongs to us all — the CNMI, Guam and the world. To assure that the prestige of the monument and its intent are preserved, the obligations and provisions of Presidential Proclamation 8335 must be upheld.

It has been over a year since the Marinas monument was designated, and I have experienced specific deadlines in the Proclamation not being met, other promises not being fulfilled, and virtually no action from any of the assigned federal agencies. I am very pleased to see this Congressional subcommittee addressing issues that other specifically tasked federal agencies appear to be neglecting.

Conclusion, I hope this testimony will be useful to assist the subcommittee with the pending legislations and the understandings set forth by the establishment of the marine monument. I appreciate the opportunity to provide testimony on these important bills and the people of the CNMI look forward to your favorable action. We are grateful for your support in assisting us to fulfill the promise of the monument. Our people, communities, cultures and economies are depending on you. Thank you.