

COMMONWEALTH OF THE NORTHERN MARIANA ISLANDS
US CORAL REEF TASK FORCE MEETING
February 25, 2009, Washington, DC

Good morning and a warm Hafa Adai greeting to Co-Chairs Nick Pula (DOI) and Mary Glackin (NOAA), Chairwoman Nancy Sutley, Governor Tulafono from American Samoa and Governor Camacho from Guam, Mr. Hershey Kyota, Ambassador of the Republic of Palau, distinguished members of the U. S. Coral Reef Task Force, government officials, environmental and community representatives, and members of the general public. It is with great pleasure that I am here today representing the people of the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands in discussions of what we know to be the crown jewels of the Ocean---our CORAL REEFS.

The CNMI recognizes the long-term significance of the U.S. Coral Reef Task Force. We appreciate the work that it has spearheaded over the last decade to protect our unique coral reefs and our much needed fisheries resources. Through these years, the Task Force has provided and maintained an open and important venue through which strong, enduring regional and international partnerships have been developed.

Since the inception of the U.S. Coral Reef Initiative, the CNMI has been able to develop, design and implement projects that address our Land-based Sources of Pollution in Laolao Bay, on the island of Saipan and erosion at Talakhaya, on the island of Rota. Funding was granted to complete an architectural and engineering design for road improvements leading to the Laolao Bay dive site frequented by visitors and residents alike, a site of unique coral reef ecosystems, turtle nesting habitat and historical significance. We continue to explore funding to further expand the implementation of these projects, and have recently submitted aspects of this Laolao project as part of the Coral Stimulus Package in the amount of \$2.7million dollars. Through the Coral Reef Initiative, we have acquired skills

to improve the quality of life in the CNMI, especially by addressing specific focus threat areas of the Coral Reef Protection Local Action Strategies plan.

In the island of Rota, we were able to implement a project to restore a badlands area suffering from soil erosion, vegetation burned by poachers to attract deer and a voluminous amount of sedimentation runoff. In 2007 and 2008, the community of Rota collaborated through the activities of this project and broadcast over 50,000 grass and tree seedlings with about 70% survival rate.

Furthermore, we've gained knowledge and learned anew the economic value of our coral reefs and associated resources through commissioning a successful coral reef economic valuation study. The results of the study highlighted revenue earning mechanisms for MPAs, legislative initiatives for sustainable financing and set a total economic value of \$61 million per year for Saipan's coral reefs.

CNMI now has 8 marine protected areas with enabling legislation and 3 completed management plans, a demonstration of our prioritizing coral reef protection. The Coral Reef Conservation Program provided funding support for our marine enforcement program which allows our conservation officers to better enforce MPA regulations. In addition, we are moving toward community-based management and increasing enforcement capacity with support from the Pacific Islands Managed and Protected Areas Community (PIMPAC).

Community involvement and lack of awareness are among the focus threats included in our local action strategies. Through our outstanding coral reef outreach program our staff visit schools on a regular basis and participate in community events raising public awareness. We have a summer student internship program that has been ongoing for 6 years, and it introduces the passion of hands-on natural resource management skills to post-secondary level college students. At least 70% of the interns switch

majors by the end of their internship, and the remaining 30% commonly add a minor in Environmental Science, Marine Biology or Natural Resource Management.

The Marine Monitoring Team, comprised of the Division of Environmental Quality and Coastal Resources Management agencies has documented statistically sound marine trends by quantifying negative relationships between watershed pollution and selected measures of seagrass, algae, and coral assemblages, thereby allowing us to re-focus CNMI watershed management strategies. We have been given the opportunity to participate regularly in the Mariana Archipelago Rapid Assessment Monitoring Program (MARAMP) cruise, which travels to all the islands in the Marianas collecting and establishing baseline data to better understand and track more efficiently the health of CNMI coral reefs. These scientific data supported CNMI coral reef management for over 20 years, thanks to funding from U.S.EPA, NOAA Coastal Zone Management and Coral Reef Conservation programs.

Recently, we completed a Conservation Action Plan (CAP) focusing on the Laolao Bay area. The CAP will be CNMI's new round of Local Action Strategies (LAS) with a site-specific, ridge-to-reef and ecosystem based approach. We look forward to NOAA's continuing assistance in conducting other CAPs for Rota and Tinian and at least one more for Saipan.

I also want to bring to your attention the Micronesia Challenge – This is an exciting initiative signed by 5 politically distinct island entities---the Republic of Palau, the Republic of Marshall Islands, the Federated States of Micronesia, Guam and the CNMI---calling for the protection of at least 30% near-shore marine resources and 20% forest/terrestrial resources throughout each jurisdiction in Micronesia. With DOI, NOAA and EPA on the Challenge's Regional Support Team, I am confident that the goals of the Challenge will be achieved. Together with the Territory of Guam and the Freely Associated States, I invite each member of this Task Force to adopt and support this innovative commitment to the protection of our natural resources.

Finally, the recent Presidential designation of the Marianas Trench Monument exemplifies the strong commitment of the CNMI people to protect the “rainforests of the sea”, while maintaining economic and cultural sustainability of the area. The end result is an example of how federal and local officials can work together productively to achieve a common objective of co-managing unique resources.

Despite all the good work that has occurred, there remain challenges that we face: the additional funding needed to implement projects, high staff turnovers, lack of training for staff, technical and enforcement capacity in the agencies and the biggest threat, climate change. The CNMI believes that when we work together collectively, most of these challenges can be dealt with. We know that there are many new resources out there that can be shared and new partnerships that are yet to be developed. Through you, I feel that alchemy exists to transform and overcome these challenges together.

In conclusion, the CNMI is pledged to work hand-in-hand with state and island jurisdictions to introduce policies and initiatives and implement them to better protect our marine resources, especially as the levels of threat to our reefs continue to rise. The CNMI is committed to ensuring that our coral reefs, the crown jewels of the Ocean will still be a bountiful, healthy and beautiful resource for future generations.

Si Yu’us Maase, Ghilisou and Thank you very much.