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WATER, WILDLIFE AND FISHERIES

Testimony to the House Committee on Foreign Affairs

Congressman Ed Case, Hawai'i District One

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Chairman McCaul, Ranking Member Meeks and distinguished members of the Committee:

Mahalo for the opportunity to testify on the enduring significance of the Pacific Islands region for the United States.

This region has held strategic and cultural importance for our nation for hundreds of years. Countless servicemembers lost their lives or were wounded in the Pacific Islands during World War II, fighting for both the security of the United States and a free Indo-Pacific. Post-World War II, the United States administered the United Nations-designated Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands, which included the three Freely Associated States. Unfortunately, our engagement waned over time and suffered from decades of insufficient attention, a situation the pacing challenge of China has been only too willing to exploit.

In 2019, I co-founded the bipartisan Pacific Islands Caucus with many members of this Committee to lend specific focus in Congress to the Pacific Islands. We have worked to include the Pacific Islands in our approach to the Indo-Pacific, and we have produced legislation like the BLUE Pacific Act to integrate the region in our strategy for Indo-Pacific engagement. Our initiatives have included advocating for the renewal of the Compacts of Free Association, the establishment of additional embassies in the Pacific Islands and increased funding for foreign assistance to the region.

Through these and other efforts, we have made promising strides towards bolstering our presence in this region and reestablishing our relationships with its island nations. The Administration, following on constructive initiatives by its predecessor, has hosted two U.S.- Pacific Islands Forum Summits in Washington, D.C. and begun efforts to open embassies in Solomon Islands, Tonga, Vanuatu and Kiribati.

After decades with deficient U.S. engagement in the region, our efforts have been welcomed. However, we have a limited window of time in which to make a new impression and prove ourselves to be steadfast partners. In this time, we must follow through on our commitments to the Indo-Pacific, as China is happy to capitalize on our failures to expand its influence. To that end, I specifically want to talk about the importance of renewing the Compacts of Free Association, bolstering our diplomatic presence in the region and passing measures like the BLUE Pacific Act.

The Compacts of Free Association have been referred to as the “bedrock” of our role in the Pacific by the 2022 Indo-Pacific Strategy. The State Department and the Department of Interior, under the direction of Special Envoy Joseph Yun, worked tirelessly to negotiate agreements to extend the Compacts with Palau, the Marshall Islands and the Federated States of Micronesia for 20 more years. The administration has submitted those agreements to Congress, and it is essential that we act swiftly to pass them into law. A delay in the passage of the new Compacts will be seen as a failure to deliver for our closest partners in the Pacific, and it will undermine our efforts to prove that we are a steadfast partner to the region as a whole.

We must also ensure that our new diplomatic posts in the Pacific Islands are adequately resourced. The efforts to open new embassies are welcome steps in a region where showing up is central to building trust. While it is up to the Senate to ensure that ambassadors to these new posts are confirmed in a timely manner, the House Foreign Affairs Committee has an important role to play in overseeing the State Department and ensuring the embassies are established post haste, offer fully functioning consular services and are fully staffed.

Finally, we must pass legislation like the BLUE Pacific Act, which would establish a whole of government strategy for engagement in the region. Our bill outlines areas of cooperation between our government and the Pacific Island nations, aligning our activities with the Pacific Islands Forum’s 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent. It also codifies the Pacific Partnership Strategy and requires that it be updated every four years, assuring Pacific Island nations that we offer long term partnership. By passing the BLUE Pacific Act, we can demonstrate that our commitment to the region is long-term and sustainable.

We have made progress in the Pacific Islands in recent years. However, now is the time that we must follow through on our commitments and ensure that our legislative efforts reflect the importance of our ties to the Pacific Islands and our support for a secure and stable Indo-Pacific.