

Committee on Natural Resources
1324 Longworth House Office Building
May 15, 2019
10:00 a.m.

Oversight Hearing on
“U.S. Department of the Interior Budget and Policy Priorities for FY 2020.”

Questions from Rep. Sablan for David Bernhardt, Secretary, Department of the Interior

1. I grow increasingly concerned about the waning influence of the United States in the Pacific and the rise of Chinese interests. America has long been the standard for leadership that countries in the Pacific look to for economic, political, and defense guidance. However, our allies in the region are increasingly engaging with China who has been more than willing to fill the void caused by our nation’s increasingly isolationist policies. The Department of Interior has a role in international activities as part of its mission to advance U.S. foreign policy objectives.
 - a. How we could bolster U.S. presence and influence in the Pacific region, remain actively engaged, and reassert ourselves as the global leader for stability and prosperity?
2. The Northern Marianas and other insular areas all benefited from supplemental Medicaid funding included in the Affordable Care Act that expires this year. I understand the “federal family” is also concerned about the potential harm to our health systems and is actively pursuing possible solutions. Congress will surely have a role to play in addressing the “Medicaid cliff” affecting the insular areas. But you can assist us greatly, Mr. Secretary. You know what the federal family can do and what proposals the administration will support.
 - a. If you could, please tell us how Congress may be able to help address this critical issue.
3. P.L. 113–235 requires that Interior develop energy action plans for each insular area. Requirements of the 2014 law:
 - Interior is supposed to create expert teams to help each insular area draw up a plan.
 - The plans are supposed to set goals for reducing foreign energy and increasing domestic.
 - The Secretary is supposed to approve the plan.

- Every year Congress is supposed to get a report from you on progress towards meeting specific benchmarks.

All with an eye on reducing electricity rates – rates that are still four times higher in the Marianas than the national average and have not changed in the years since the law was enacted. I received a letter from Assistant Secretary for Insular and International Affairs, Doug Domenech with information about energy strategies each insular area has and a record of energy grants that Interior has awarded. However, it all seemed a bit unfocused, and despite millions of dollars spent, electricity costs have not changed – at least not in the Northern Marianas. Also, mere mentions in the Department's annual budget justifications do not suffice as annual reports required by law. Please tell me what the Department is doing to start actually implementing energy action plans for the insular areas and complying with requirements of P.L. 113-235.