

Good afternoon, and good morning to those in the Northern Marianas and Guam where it is now 7:00 am. Thank you to all our witness for participating in today's legislative hearing.

Welcome to all our witnesses today. I want to especially welcome my good friends, Governor Guerrero of Guam and Speaker Terlaje of the Guam Legislature.

We are meeting today to receive testimony from elected officials from Guam and other relevant parties on H.R. 6504, the Native Pacific Islanders of America Equity Act. This bill would expand business opportunities for our indigenous entrepreneurs to allow Chamorro and Refaluwasch-owned firms to participate in federal contracting and mentorship programs open to other native peoples in America.

H.R. 6504 would establish a means to identify qualified Native Chamorro companies in Guam and organizations owned by individuals of Northern Marianas descent as firms eligible for Small Business Administration benefits including preference for federal set-aside, sole-source, and general contracts.

H.R. 6504 was introduced by my friend and colleague from Guam, Representative Mike San Nicolas. I joined as an original cosponsor and I thank the congressman for working with me to include Chamorro and Refaluwasch entities from my district, the Northern Mariana Islands, as eligible for the bill's expanded SBA benefits.

Currently, other native groups and organizations get preferential consideration through the 8(a) program of the U.S. Small Business Administration while the indigenous and Chamorro and Refaluwasch do not. The 8(a) program provides training and certification of American Indian, Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian enterprises for set-aside and sole-source federal contracts. The 8(a) program has been shown

effective in providing meaningful assistance to socially and economically challenged groups throughout our country.

Enactment of H.R. 6504 would help indigenous Chamorro and Refaluwasch organizations effectively compete for federal contracts available in area. This will be especially important for firms that could compete for projects related to the U.S. military buildup in our region.

The new opportunities created by the bill should help strengthen and diversify our economies. It builds on previous work to help small business in the Marianas, including enactment of my Northern Mariana Islands Small Business Development Act in the 2021 National Defense Authorization Act. As a result, the Marianas Small Business Development Center is no longer a Guam sub-office. We have been able to establish our own Marianas Lead Small Business Development Center, eligible for up to \$750,000 in funding this year.

We had hoped to have the director of the Northern Marianas Small Business Development Center Network as a witness to testify on the bill today. But unfortunately, he was not able to join us.

Nevertheless, I want to take this opportunity to commend the Marianas' SBDC for the good work they have been doing to promote a business-friendly economic infrastructure in the Marianas. They have helped build entrepreneurial capacity and financial literacy and have strived to provide current and new small businesses in Tinian, Rota, and Saipan with the necessary technical assistance, counseling, training, and support to innovate, adapt, and grow.

I want to again welcome all our witnesses today. I look forward to receiving your testimony.