

Testimony of Lemanu Palepoi Sialega Mauga
Governor of American Samoa

Before the
U.S. House of Representatives
Committee on Natural Resources
Office of Insular Affairs

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Talofa and Greetings from American Samoa. I want to thank Chairman Grijalva, Ranking Member Westerman, Vice Chair Sablan, and distinguished members of the Committee for this opportunity to comment on the FY'23 budget for the Office of Insular Affairs at the Department of the Interior. We also want to thank our Congresswoman High Chief Uifa'atali Radewagen for her work, not only for our territory, but for all territories within the purview of this Committee.

We have learned much from FY-22, and still faces enormous challenges as we plan for FY-23. I would like to share with you key important challenges facing American Samoa, but I would be remised if I don't say "thank you all" for your ongoing efforts to improve the lives of those living in the US Territories.

LBJ HOSPITAL: American Samoa has only one acute care hospital -- the Lyndon Baines Johnson Medical Center (LBJ Hospital). The facility, built in 1968, lacks the physical capacity to appropriately respond to a host of medical conditions, and struggled to handle the COVID-19 pandemic. LBJ is now diverting its limited operating resources to address the pandemic, causing the potential for shortages of medication essential health supplies, equipment, doctors, nurses, workforce, and overcrowded old hospital building. Thanks to FEMA for the supply of volunteers of doctors and nurses in support of COVID-19.

In 2019, the Interior Department's Office of Insular Affairs (OIA), conducted an assessment of the LBJ facility and concluded that the hospital was not in compliance with current seismic and wind

requirements and suggested that, rather than repair or retrofit the current facility, construction of a new hospital would be more advantageous. The Army Corps of Engineers also conducted a review and determined that the LBJ facility “is in a state of failure due to age and environmental exposure.” The Corps noted that extensive repair and/or replacement of the facility is required to ensure compliance with hospital accreditation standards and to protect the life, health, and safety of staff, patients, and visitors. The LBJ facilities also does not have the equipment or personnel to treat cancer, hip and knee replacements, heart and other surgeries, and maladies that afflict the people of American Samoa. For those medical conditions, patients are flown off island, via medical transport, to New Zealand for treatment. The people of American Samoa need better access to care without having to fly to another country for life-saving procedures and care.

The Administration’s budget requests totals \$9.1 million for hospital operations, and we are thankful for the requested funds. However, we respectfully request a major increase in our operating revenues to help provide the resources needed to respond to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and, at the same time, continue to provide the care and treatment for other critical medical conditions. A new or additional ARPA source of funds is critical to constructing a new hospital to replace the outdated LBJ facility, and to provide better healthcare for our people.

COVID-19: In order to control the spread of COVID-19, ASG shut down its borders in November of 2020. As a result of those efforts, we were one of the few places in the world without any COVID-19 cases. But that status changed in September 2021 when we began to bring people back to the Island. The first positive case was a resident returning to American Samoa from Hawaii. Cases now total over 5,800, with 109 active cases, and 30 reported deaths. The ASG worked with limited resources to build quarantine facilities and to retrofit its one hospital in preparation for COVID-19. Our vaccination efforts have reached more than 80 percent of our population, and we continue our quarantine operations as we bring back more flights to our island. COVID-19 has

reduced our local revenue because of the decline of domestic and international travel, leading to the closure of businesses and job loss. All of these factors make increased Federal dollars more important than ever.

OUR CONNECTION TO THE WORLD: Our ability to communicate with the outside world has been challenged during the COVID-19 pandemic. If it were not for the funding and support received in 2012 for our BLAST fiber project, American Samoa and our people would be in a very different state today. I want to make it known how much we appreciate you all making it possible for us to follow CDC guidelines, distance learning, remote work, and manage our supply chains. However, we respectfully request additional assistance for our communications infrastructure as COVID-19 and new economic realities are placing more demands and challenges on our ability to stay connected.

Shipyard: I am pleased to report that we have accomplished our goal for the American Samoa Shipyard to be able to service larger vessels such as purse seiners and USCG cutters. Our efforts over the last year in fully repairing the cradles and revitalizing this shipyard to bring up to standards have made this possible. We've accomplished these goals due with strong support and funding provided by the US Department of Interior, Office of Insular Affairs. The Shipyard is ready and eager to service the Coast Guard vessels.

Climate Change: Natural disasters have become more prevalent in the Pacific region, and we have experienced damages to our critical infrastructure as a result of sea-level rise, severe floods, coastal erosion, and landslides. American Samoa is exceptionally vulnerable to sea level rise because a significant portion of the islands' villages and infrastructure, including all critical ports, are located along thin strips of coastal land. The situation is worsened by ongoing subsidence since the 2009 Samoa earthquake and tsunami resulting in shifting of tectonic plates. **American Samoa is subsiding at a rate roughly six times the global sea-level rise average, and experiencing a relative sea level rise of 9.8 inches in eleven years (from Sept. 2009- Jan. 2020).**

We need to respond to climate change with a matter of urgency by investing in mitigation projects that will reduce the risk of damages to existing infrastructure and ensure community resilience in the aftermath of all hazards' disasters. The untimely events of extreme weather and disasters are unavoidable and expensive. The rebuild is time consuming especially with limited readily available resources and project related subject matter expertise on island.

Notwithstanding our mutual interests and benefits with the United States, American Samoa remains a disadvantaged and under-served population. We believe this is due to our remoteness and our small voice. My purpose here, as the Governor of the Territory of American Samoa, is to raise our voice a little higher, and highlight our need for financial and technical assistance for planning, design, and construction, to create resiliency and adaptation to the impacts from climate change.

We respectfully request that funding be substantially increased to address the infrastructure needs of American Samoa given its geographic location and dependence on imported materials for critical infrastructure. Cost of Living in American Samoa has rapidly increased since late 2021 due to global pandemic impacts beyond our control where inflation rates are factored into both planning and implementation stages of our funded projects. We seek your support to consider the supply chain issues and shipping costs that heavily impact our island economies, and how much can be accomplished if our allocations are increased to account for the new norm in handling critical infrastructure compared to pre-COVID years. The least we can ask for is sufficient budgets to address our critical infrastructural development needs during these unprecedented times.

The assistance provided to our territory should be viewed in the context of the increased strategic importance of American Samoa and the region in which it is located. China has been raising increasing concerns in the South Pacific through its aggressive and illegal fishing activities; its disregard of the exclusive economic zones of island communities; its

use of aid to gain influence and facilitate espionage in the region; and its increased militarism near important shipping routes. The new security pact between China and the Solomon Islands has the US and its allies contemplating the once unthinkable specter of a Chinese military base in the South Pacific. China's presence in the Pacific challenges the posture of US (and of other nations) influence. Such a presence and revisionist approaches to erode alliances and partnerships have been noted by the US Navy and the Tri-Service Maritime Strategy as detrimental to US naval advantages and potentially degrading to free and open international order. As the only US territory in the South Pacific and home to one of the most strategically valuable deep-water harbors in Oceania, American Samoa will continue to do its part to help the US promote peace and stability in the region. The patriotic residents of our territory have consistently supported US national security with the one resource we value even more than our land: our people, who continue to enlist in the US military at rates higher than in any state of the US.

American Samoa is grateful for your continued support and efforts to build and maintain our infrastructure, address climate change and security issues, and the economic and social disruptions that we and the other US Territories are currently facing.

We thank you once again for the opportunity to address this distinguished Committee and to comment on the needs of American Samoa. Fa'afetai.