



COFA Alliance National Network

[www.cann.us](http://www.cann.us)

Written Statement of  
COFA ALLIANCE NATIONAL NETWORK

Before the  
U.S. HOUSE COMMITTEE ON NATURAL RESOURCES  
INDO-PACIFIC TASK FORCE

Hearing On:  
BIDEN'S ADMINISTRATION PROPOSED COMPACT OF FREE  
ASSOCIATION AMENDMENTS ACT OF 2023

Tuesday, July 18, 2023, at 10:15 AM EST



COFA Alliance National Network

[www.cann.us](http://www.cann.us)

Concerning the current negotiations between the United States and the Freely Associated States on the Amendments Act of the Compact of Free Association (COFA). The COFA Alliance National Network (CANN) non-profit organization for COFA communities would like to submit a testimony for the U.S. Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resource to consider seriously.

The COFA Alliance National Network (CANN) was founded on January 1, 2014 by community leaders advocating for economic and social justice to be consistent with the compact treaties. Presently, citizens of the three Compact of Free Association (COFA or "the compact") nations (also known as the Freely Associated States or FAS) who reside in the United States face significant and persistent inequities, due to systemic barriers and exclusions. A series of federal and state policy decisions have been made without full consideration of the unique COFA treaties. As a result, close to 100,000 people from the FAS in the US have faced historical denial and discrimination on a range of public and federal benefits including health care, welfare, employment and educational opportunities. Most recently, the disaster relief programs by FEMA during the COVID-19 Pandemic has highlighted these inequities. CANN found that it is important to provide more information about the historical relationship of the Compact agreement to policy makers to address these injustices at the state and federal levels.

The headquarters for CANN is based in the State of Oregon where it began organizing with COFA communities and policy makers to change the status quo. Oregon's capital, Salem became a "home away from home" for many COFA residents from the Marshall Islands, accounting for over 3,000 people and representing the 2<sup>nd</sup> largest minority population in the city. In 2013, after learning about the mistreatment that the Marshallese were receiving caused by the REAL ID Act of 2005, community leaders decided that action was needed locally and nationally. First to be addressed was correcting the extreme difficulties that the issuance of a one-year driver's license was creating for the people from the FAS. While the driver's license issue was the spark that laid the foundation of CANN, it was only one of a constellation of other injustices emanating from the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 which discriminated against the FAS communities. It actually denied them access to crucial federal benefits such as Medicaid, SNAP and other safety net programs.

CANN fully understands that the most precious right for the people of the Freely Associated States is air, sea and LAND. As Land is scarce, it is the people's most sacred asset. It is passed down through maternal lineages and cannot be bought and sold as it is in the United States.

# CANN

COFA Alliance National Network

[www.cann.us](http://www.cann.us)

Parcels of land are inextricably intertwined with personal identity, culture and heritage. The idea that LAND is a fixed part of the family tree is nearly impossible for Americans to understand.

As plans to build the US nuclear arsenal grew, the US government determined that the islands would be used for nuclear weapons testing. From 1946-1958, the United States conducted a total of 67 high-yield nuclear tests in the Marshall Islands, mainly on Bikini and Enewetak Atolls. This included Castle Bravo in Bikini Atoll, the largest U.S. nuclear test, which was about 1,000 times more powerful than the bomb dropped on Hiroshima. Radioactive fallout from this test traveled worldwide.

CANN recognizes and is appreciative of provisions included in the Joint Resolution to Congress, including the extension of Veterans Affairs benefits to veterans now living in the Freely Associated States, and restoration of federal benefits for COFA citizens residing in the United States. These provisions represent important progress in justice for COFA citizens.

However, many challenges remain, and CANN urges the Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources to seriously address the following:

- 1) If the RMI treaty is not finalized by Sept. 30, Congress should pass a Continuing Resolution for the Marshall Islands so that critical services, such as the US Postal Services, health, education, and banking systems, as well as other necessities will continue to function smoothly. CANN understands the repercussions for both countries if the deadline passes without signing of the Agreement. There is a strong possibility that the People's Republic of China (PRC) will attempt to step in and offer to fill the critical economic assistance gaps.
- 2) The US should officially acknowledge that the nuclear bomb testing in the RMI did cause permanent damage to the land and generational health issues to the people. Nuclear testing impacted the entire country, not just the four atolls originally identified in the 1986 Compact.
- 3) CANN supports the view that the \$700 million offering in the current signed RMI MOU is inadequate.
- 4) As Senator Joe Bejang of Lib shared earlier this year, "In 1961 Lib Islanders were forcibly displaced for the early stages of Inter-Continental Ballistic Missile (ICBM) testing program on Kwajalein Atoll. When they were allowed to return a few years later, they found their homeland irrevocably altered. Until now Lib Islanders experience intergenerational impacts of displacement and unknown levels of contamination on their island. Lib Islanders deserve

# CANN

COFA Alliance National Network

[www.cann.us](http://www.cann.us)

access to all information related to their island in order to make informed decisions for their homeland and community, and Lib Islanders deserve fair and just compensation for their role in the success of your missile testing program.” This issue must be addressed, as separate legislation or in another appropriate form.

- 5) CANN supports the Federated States of Micronesia and the Republic of Palau in their negotiations for full funding of the Postal Service in the FAS.

In addition, CANN is aware that the People's Republic of China wants the Compact negotiations to fail. They see an opportunity to fill the vacuum. If the negotiations fail, the temptation for the RMI to officially acknowledge the PRC instead of Taiwan substantially increases. CANN believes that granting the above will serve the US well, as it will greatly diminish the temptation for the RMI to turn their heads to the East, looking for economic assistance. Furthermore, it is our moral obligation to take responsibility for what needs to be done, leaving no space for the PRC.

Having dealt with the many social and economic equity issues for the three COFA nations for many years, CANN strongly believes that the requests listed above are very reasonable. Even with the above being granted, it will fall far short of the funding level required to rehabilitate the radiated land for human habitation. It should be kept in mind that to fairly compensate the RMI people displaced from their home islands may be impossible, but the US will get closer to winning the hearts and minds of the people if the above is granted. It is the right thing to do.

The Marshallese people are by their very nature a kind, loving, welcoming and respectful people and treat American visitors as if they are family. But it is becoming increasingly difficult for them to grasp why the US marginalizes their importance and their cries for help. Help to restore and partially heal their homelands, and at the very least take more responsibility for what they have done. This third Compact represents the opportunity for the US to take that responsibility. The RMI people will never forget what the Americans did to free them from the grasp of the Empire of Japan during WWII. The US was spared the loss of many lives during the invasion of RMI as result of the intelligence gained from Marshallese spying.

This is the time for the US to listen to the Marshallese people, so that they can say, “Yes, America, we remain willing to stand with you in the United Nations and we remain full throated in our support of your side in discussions throughout the Pacific. We will do this because now you are listening to us and you are acknowledging our cry for help.”

# CANN

COFA Alliance National Network

[www.cann.us](http://www.cann.us)

Loyd Henion

[lhenion@cann.us](mailto:lhenion@cann.us)

David Anitok

[danitok@cann.us](mailto:danitok@cann.us)