

PHONE (808) 594-1888

FAX (808) 594-1938



STATE OF HAWAII
OFFICE OF HAWAIIAN AFFAIRS
560 N. NIMITZ HWY., SUITE 200
HONOLULU, HAWAII 96817

September 13, 2019

The Honorable Tom Udall
Vice Chair
U.S. Senate Committee on Indian Affairs
838 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Brian Schatz
Chairman
Senate Democrats' Special Committee on the
Climate Crisis
722 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

Re: Climate Change and the Native Hawaiian Community

Dear Vice Chair Udall and Senator Schatz:

Mahalo nui loa to you both for your leadership on issues challenging our Native American communities in the United States, particularly the issues caused by climate change. The Office of Hawaiian Affairs (OHA) is a quasi-independent, semi-autonomous agency of the State of Hawai'i, established through our State's constitution. Hawai'i state law recognizes OHA as "the principle public agency in this State responsible for the performance, development, and coordination of programs and activities relating to native Hawaiians." The OHA Board of Trustees are democratically elected by the citizens of Hawai'i for the purpose of managing certain trust assets directed by the federal government to be set aside for the benefit of the Native Hawaiian community and oversee OHA's other roles in working for Hawai'i's indigenous people.

Although the American Indian, Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian communities have historically served as the stewards of our environments, climate change is affecting our people immediately and, in many cases, we are witnessing these harmful effects first. Climate change disproportionately affects our people by degrading not only our natural environment but also our cultural resources. To effectively address climate change for native peoples, we urge Congress to take a four-pronged approach to include native communities in climate change action.

1. Empower Native American communities to decide our own futures in the face of climate change.

Self-determination is vital to our communities. Historically, when the federal government denies native communities our self-determination, the resulting trauma and the associated mental health issues persist through generations.¹ We must remain the makers of our own destinies. As the federal government determines how to mitigate and adapt to climate change, native communities must be involved in decision-making and make all final determinations affecting our people. In the event that our land becomes uninhabitable because of rising sea levels, we must have a seat at the table and determine the best path forward.

Additionally, the Office of Hawaiian Affairs requests a specially-designated seat on any climate change advisory committees or management groups that affect the islands of Hawai‘i or the Native Hawaiian community. Currently, OHA holds a similar position as a co-manager for Papahānaumokuākea Marine National Monument. This active, dedicated role in the conservation efforts affecting Native Hawaiian culture and resources has been widely successful in infusing our unique perspective into federal resource management and policy. Thus, we are always seeking additional opportunities to establish federal partnerships with various agencies.

2. Empower Native American communities to spread the stewardship practices of our ancestors and to innovate new adaptive approaches to conserve our resources and mitigate climate change effects.

The connection between native communities and the natural world allows our people to effectively serve as stewards of our land. The federal government should promote our agricultural and stewardship practices to not only ensure they live on for future generations but also because our traditional practices are time-tested, best practices for mitigating and adapting to climate change effects and for furthering conservation efforts.

Native Hawaiian agricultural and resource conservation practices have proven effective. Prior to contact with the Europeans, our ancestors established a land resource management system wherein each island was divided by moku (district) and further into ahupua‘a (tracts of land from the mountains to the sea).² Each ahupua‘a was managed by a konohiki (land agent).³ The Office of Hawaiian Affairs recognizes that the ahupua‘a system leads to ‘āina momona (abundance), and so Native Hawaiians are reintegrating this system into our way of life so that we can ensure a sustainable lifestyle for future generations.⁴ To assist in these efforts, OHA collects data on ahupua‘a management. As of December 31, 2018, approximately fifteen percent of the 119 ahupua‘a measured were being managed with

¹ Jackie M. Young, *Transforming from Trauma*, HAW. BUS. MAG. (May 4, 2018), <https://www.hawaiiibusiness.com/transformation-from-trauma/>; Kathleen Brown-Rice, *Examining the Theory of Historical Trauma Among Native Americans*, PROFESSIONAL COUNSELOR, <http://tpcjournal.nbcc.org/examining-the-theory-of-historical-trauma-among-native-americans/> (last visited Sept. 6, 2019).

² *Connection to Place*, STATE OF HAW. OPEN GOV'T DASHBOARD, <https://dashboard.hawaii.gov/stat/goals/5xhf-begg/ezet-axai/gqps-vyp8> (last visited Sept. 6, 2019).

³ OFFICE OF HAWAIIAN AFFAIRS, *E Ho‘olau Kānaka* 37 (April 2019).

⁴ *Connection to Place*, STATE OF HAW. OPEN GOV'T DASHBOARD, <https://dashboard.hawaii.gov/stat/goals/5xhf-begg/ezet-axai/gqps-vyp8> (last visited Sept. 6, 2019).

community-based plans to support natural, cultural, and economic resources.⁵ These community-based plans inject a traditional, cultural competency component into contemporary stewardship of the islands. OHA hopes to bring back the *konohiki* and traditional management, and ultimately return to the *ahupua'a* management system.⁶ Further support of traditional native practices like *ahupua'a* management are critical to ensuring climate change mitigation and adaptation.

Additionally, OHA has been supportive of conservation efforts in the State of Hawai'i. OHA supported the passage into law of a bill to ban the sales of sunscreens containing oxybenzone and octinoxate, chemicals known to harm our coral reef.⁷ Most recently, OHA has provided grants to community members restoring the ancient fishponds that our people used as natural refrigerators to sustainably manage our fisheries' resources. This type of active engagement is critical in ensuring native voices remain heard throughout our climate change response.

Unfortunately, our agency cannot act alone as advocates for native conservation and agricultural practices. We must empower native communities to implement these stewardship practices throughout the state and across the country. With this in mind, Congress should consider directing the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) to implement federal programs that promote native agricultural and conservation practices through native collaborations and promote the utilization of our traditional knowledge of the environment to implement climate change mitigation and adaptation plans. These collaborations and federal support will allow best practices for region-specific areas to be carried out more effectively and on a larger scale.

3. Increase resiliency and adaptability of Native American communities through disaster preparedness, mitigation, and recovery initiatives

As climate change effects continue to intensify, OHA requests the federal government consider measures that will increase our people's resilience to these harmful events while also integrating our time-tested stewardship practices. To ensure Native American communities, including American Indian, Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian communities, may continue to exercise self-determination in confronting the impacts of climate change, we request that federal grants for disaster recovery, preparedness, and mitigation efforts be made available directly to our communities through the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and the U.S. Small Business Administration (SBA) Disaster Assistance Program.

Under the Sandy Recovery Improvement Act of 2013, Congress did not provide a way for FEMA and SBA to deliver federal support to Native Hawaiian organizations assisting our people in recovering from climate change-related natural disasters. Yet, many Native Hawaiian organizations (NHOs) have helped Native Hawaiians negatively impacted by natural disasters to get back on their feet. Because NHOs are providing direct support, Congress should subsidize programs to allow these organizations to provide more robust resources. Further, FEMA should be required to consult with the Native Hawaiian community before taking action that will affect our people. Finally, native

⁵ *Id.*

⁶ OFFICE OF HAWAIIAN AFFAIRS, *E Ho'olau Kānaka* 37 (April 2019).

⁷ Nina Wu, *Hawaii Becomes First State to Ban Sale of Sunscreens with Coral-Harming Chemicals*, STAR ADVERTISER (July 3, 2019), <https://www.staradvertiser.com/2018/07/03/breaking-news/hawaii-becomes-1st-state-to-ban-sale-of-sunscreens-with-coral-harming-chemicals/>.

communities need grant programs to support natural disaster preparedness. Members of our community have been affected by recent natural disasters and have needed support with finding emergency housing, filing insurance claims, and other resilience-related steps. We must prepare our community for future, inevitable events now, but our current resources are limited to support a lasting effort.⁸

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (ACE) also runs a Climate Preparedness and Resilience Program to develop, implement, and assess adjustments to operations in the face of observed or expected changes in climate.⁹ An expedited permitting process would allow ACE to better respond to quickly changing environmental circumstances while also considering the voice of the Native Hawaiian people. Again, maximizing our ability to prepare now for major disaster will ensure the continuing success of our native people.

4. Encourage native students to pursue a career in science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM).

Scientific monitoring and data collection is critical to understanding the current effects of climate change.¹⁰ To fully understand these changes, we must nurture the growth of more native scientists from elementary schools through college. Consistent with this goal, OHA's Board of Trustees supports S. 2037, the Building Indigenous STEM Professionals Act, a bipartisan bill intended to expand opportunities for indigenous students. We urge Congress to pass this piece of legislation into law in the 116th Congress

Mahalo nui loa again for the opportunity to weigh in on this climate change discussion. Native communities are uniquely and immediately affected by these issues because our homelands and culture are threatened by the effects of climate change. Congress must turn to the stewardship practices of our ancestors and new environmental science-based practices to inform and shape our responses to now-unavoidable future disasters caused by climate change. We ask for your swift action to implement a comprehensive mitigation and adaptive action plan on climate change for our communities.

Sincerely,



Sylvia M. Hussey, Ed.D.
Ka Pouhana Kūikawā, Interim Chief Executive Officer

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⁸ *Hawaiian Community Assets Responds to Natural Disasters*, LOC. INITIATIVES SUPPORT CORP. RURAL (Aug. 31, 2018), <http://www.lisc.org/rural/regional-stories/hawaiian-community-action/>.

⁹ *Climate Preparedness and Resilience*, U.S. ARMY CORPS OF ENGINEERS, <https://www.usace.army.mil/corpsclimate/> (last visited Sept. 6, 2019).

¹⁰ OFFICE OF HAWAIIAN AFFAIRS, *E Ho'olau Kānaka* 38 (April 2019).