



THE CLIMATE STRONG ISLANDS NETWORK

The Climate Strong Islands Network

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April 25, 2024

The Honorable Harriet Hageman
House Natural Resources Committee
Subcommittee on Indian and Insular Affairs
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Teresa Leger Fernández
House Natural Resources Committee
Subcommittee on Indian and Insular Affairs
Washington, DC 20515

Chair Hageman, Ranking Member Leger Fernández, and Members of the Subcommittee,

Thank you for the opportunity to provide written testimony as part of the record for the Indian and Insular Affairs Subcommittee hearing entitled “Energizing the Territories: Promoting Affordable and Reliable Energy Sources for the U.S. Insular Areas.” U.S. islands and territories need sound energy policy to ensure a future that allows their communities to continue to thrive. Clean, affordable, renewable energy will be a key part of building the resiliency of island communities as they face increased impacts of climate change, including natural disasters, sea level rise, and extreme weather events. Key to ensuring that energy (and all other) federal policies work for island communities is to include island voices in policy discussions, and to truly listen as they voice their needs and present solutions that work for their unique communities.

The Climate Strong Islands Network (CSIN) was formed to help amplify the collective voice of island communities to drive more resources, supportive policies, and attention to U.S. islands. The CSIN Steering Committee includes community leaders from Guam, Northern Mariana Islands, Alaska, Hawai’i, Puerto Rico, American Samoa, and St. Croix. CSIN’s mission is to build an effective coalition of island entities that work across sectors and geographies in the continental U.S. and the nation’s states and territories located in the Caribbean and Pacific with the goal of helping their communities become more climate resilient.

U.S. islands face a host of singular challenges exacerbated by climate change and natural hazards, geographic limitations, and varying degrees of political affiliation and representation within the U.S. government. Island communities exist at the forefront of climate change, whether it be reoccurring disasters such as hurricanes and tsunamis or slow-onset issues such as extreme heat, ecosystem shifts, ocean warming, and sea level rise. These events have far-ranging impacts on human life and livelihoods, as well as on societal systems and supports. CSIN was established to bring island communities together to address these challenges and to establish their voice on national policy priorities and to build community resilience in the face of climate change. CSIN advocates for island-driven policy changes that address the unique challenges faced by island communities.

CSIN is particularly interested in the subject of this hearing because it presents the opportunity to highlight the ways in which island communities, including the U.S. territories, are taking active steps to diversify their energy grids and prepare for future climate-related energy disruptions and challenges.



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After watching the “Energizing the Territories: Promoting Affordable and Reliable Energy Sources for the U.S. Insular Areas” hearing, CSIN wants to emphasize several important points:

Island Communities Want Clean Energy

In 2021, CSIN, led by its Steering Committee of island community leaders, released its National Islands Policy Framework, which outlines 7 Key Issue Areas along with policy priorities and recommendations CSIN supports that will help islands become more resilient to climate change. Clean Energy is one of these key priority issues for CSIN. The National Islands Policy Framework states:

“In order to become climate resilient, U.S. islands need local, independent, reliable, and affordable energy generation and community based distribution systems that are locally informed and accountable to local needs. Islands are naturally more vulnerable to the effects of natural disasters so they need self-sufficient and reliable energy systems to ensure they can continue to serve their community even after a natural disaster. Because of their unique geography and populations, islands are the ideal place for renewable energy technologies and innovations. Islands will need continued investment, support, and technical training to transition to a clean energy future. Technical training allows for islands to develop their existing workforce with renewable energy expertise while meeting the unique needs of their community. Developing individual island capacity decreases islands' reliance on fossil fuels and enables them to become energy independent. Energy systems that work on an island could be applied to other rural communities across the continental United States to help those rural communities become more climate resilient.”¹

The broad policy recommendations from CSIN related to Clean Energy are:

1. Federal government support for island communities in establishing and achieving clean energy or net zero goals.
2. Federal clean energy policies and recommendations that are locally and culturally relevant and consider local expertise.
3. Develop effective federal funding mechanisms to incentivize and support clean energy deployment and energy storage solutions on islands.
4. Expand DOE’s authority to finance clean energy projects in frontline communities, including island communities.
5. Establish programs to operate clean energy related pilot programs on U.S. islands to advance projects like microgrids and small scale power generation.

Island communities across the U.S. and the territories are demonstrating their interest in clean energy innovation. Programs like the Energizing Insular Communities (EIC) give islands the resources they need to launch their island-created and island-driven clean energy initiatives. The projects funded by the EIC program in FY2023, such as CNMI’s Energy Task Force and Guam’s “Guam100” project, demonstrate that island communities are leading the way to diversify and decarbonize their electric grids.² Islands are looking ahead and working hard to innovate and find sustainable energy solutions that will help their communities become more resilient to climate change.

¹ [CSIN National Islands Policy Framework](#)

² <https://www.doi.gov/media/document/eic-grants-territories-2023>



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Island Communities Need Diverse Energy Sources

When natural disasters and extreme weather hits island communities, resilient power generation for electricity is imperative to ensure the safety of island residents and the operation of emergency response activities. That is why island communities need diverse energy sources that can ensure reliability when they need it the most. Renewable energy sources like solar and wind can continue to power homes and community services if a fossil fuel generated power plant is impacted by an earthquake, or if bad weather forces delays in the shipment of diesel fuel.

On April 12, 2024, the day after the Subcommittee hearing, the Virgin Islands Water and Power Authority (WAPA) announced scheduled power outages “...due to ‘inclement marine weather’ in St. Thomas and St. John and offline generating units on St. Croix.”³ Throughout the scheduled outages, residents and businesses were impacted, and the stability of the electrical grid was dependent on island residents reducing their energy consumption. This is a significant burden and disruption on island communities, one which could be avoided if diverse energy sources could come online when needed to respond to disaster and weather related energy disruptions.

Island communities support the EIC program because it invests in island-driven initiatives that diversify island energy sources, expand clean energy generation, and reduce energy costs for island residents, which ultimately will help islands become more climate resilient.

Island Communities Need Affordable and Reliable Energy

Most islands do not produce their own petroleum or its derivatives like diesel, requiring islands to import fuel to operate their electricity generating power plants. This imported fossil fuel is not cheap, causing island communities to pay more than the average mainland U.S. community for their basic power needs. Further, fossil fuel energy is not immune to climate change disruptions. As demonstrated by the news of rolling blackouts in St. Croix, fossil fuel imports can be impacted by severe weather, and fossil fuel power plants can be damaged in natural disasters like floods and tsunamis. By diversifying their power sources and utilizing renewable energy sources that are available on islands, using technology to harness that energy that largely already exists, islands can reduce their energy costs and create a more reliable grid.

Island Communities Need Representation

U.S. islands are politically under-represented by policymakers and elected officials in Washington, D.C., which has resulted in under-investment and a lack of knowledge and understanding by policy makers of the challenges they face and the unique ways in which federal policies will impact their communities. CSIN advocates for stronger representation for U.S. islands, so their unique needs are taken into consideration during the federal decision making processes. Congress and federal agencies have a responsibility to engage more directly with island communities as they establish and implement policies that impact islands.

To address this issue, the federal government must make adjustments to ensure that a) island voices are heard during policy making processes, b) adequate consideration is given to the unique challenges of island communities, and c) island communities are directly engaged in the implementation of policies. Taking these steps will empower island communities to engage in the policy process and will ensure that

³ <https://www.sottvi.news/p/wapa-shares-schedule-for-rolling-blackouts>



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future policies can be realistically deployed in island communities, which will go a long way to ensuring islands achieve long-term climate resiliency.

Thank you for the opportunity to contribute testimony for the hearing record. The Climate Strong Islands Network stands ready to assist the Subcommittee in the future by providing an island perspective on policies that impact island communities.

Sincerely,

Climate Strong Islands Network

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