

**TESTIMONY OF AMBASSOR JACKSON T. SORAM
OF THE FEDERATED STATES OF MICRONESIA**

House Natural Resources Subcommittee on Indian and Insular Affairs
Examining the Implementation of the Compact of Free Association Amendments Act of 2024

September 10, 2024
Washington, D.C.

Chairman Westerman (R-AR), Ranking Member Grijalva (D-AZ), Subcommittee Chair Hageman (R-WY), Ranking Member Leger Fernandez (D-NM), and members of the Subcommittee, thank you for convening this hearing and for the opportunity to testify before you today. My name is Jackson Soram. I am honored to serve as the Ambassador of the Federated States of Micronesia (FSM) to the United States.

The U.S. and the FSM enjoy an extraordinarily close relationship that has been strengthened through our enduring diplomatic, economic, and military partnership and commitments as part of the Compact of Free Association. Earlier this year, the U.S. Government demonstrated this support through the enactment of *the Compact of Free Association (COFA) Amendments Act*. This critical legislation updates and extends economic assistance provisions of the Compact of Free Association between our nations for an additional 20-year period and restores or extends other key benefits for FSM citizens in the United States. We are deeply grateful to the House Natural Resources Committee and the Trump and Biden Administrations for the years of work required for these achievements. Your dedication reinforces our mutual commitments to our enduring partnership and the fact that we have no greater friend in the world than the United States.

We are grateful that the U.S. Congress approved an annual appropriation for sector grants for the FSM of \$140 million per year in the *COFA Amendments Act*. This is a significant increase. During the first week of September, we had our first in-person meeting with the United States under the framework of the Joint Economic Management Committee, or JEMCO. The Joint Committee has provisionally concurred with the FSM proposed sector grant allocations for Fiscal Year 2025. We remain hopeful that final concurrence will happen in the coming days. It is evident that in this transition phase to a new framework of U.S.-FSM agreements that there are bilateral challenges to be overcome in detailed implementation. The FSM is committed to working with the U.S. in this transition to the new agreements.

In addition to extending the U.S.'s critical financial assistance and the provision of U.S. federal programs and services in the FSM, the *COFA Amendments Act* addresses several longstanding challenges for FSM citizens, who choose to live, work, and study in the U.S and serve in the U.S. military. We are pleased FSM citizens residing lawfully in the U.S. are again eligible for key public benefits as a result of the bipartisan and bicameral *Compact Impact Fairness Act*. Additionally, we are delighted the Amended Compact includes the bipartisan and bicameral, *Care for COFA Veterans Act*, which provides improvements to medical care access to veterans in the Freely Associated States (FAS). We appreciate congressional support for these pieces of legislation. The *COFA Amendments Act* also ensures continuing eligibility for Pell

Grants and other key education benefits for FSM students, which will strengthen the future of our country for generations to come.

Since the enactment of the Amended Compact, the FSM has worked diligently to engage with federal agencies regarding Compact implementation. We are pleased that the Departments of Education, Agriculture, Health and Human Services, and FEMA have issued guidance to reflect the changes in the updated Compact:

- The Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) published guidance discussing changes to several programs, including the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families Program, the Low-Income Home Energy Assistance Program, and the Social Services Block Grant.
- HHS has been in contact with the FSM and Congress regarding the Head Start Program, which was authorized by the Compact and will require discretionary appropriations. Notable, these funds have been included in the House and Senate Fiscal Year 2025 Labor, Health and Human Services, Education and Related Agencies appropriations bills, thanks to the support of several lawmakers;
- The Department of Education issued information regarding the education provisions within the Amended Compact;
- FEMA announced the eligibility of FAS citizens for disaster assistance; and
- The Department of Agriculture released guidance on the eligibility changes to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program.

Overall, we are pleased with the progress toward implementation of the law by the agencies previously mentioned. Unfortunately, we are disappointed by the lack of engagement from the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). The *COFA Amendments Act* establishes a one-year period following the enactment of the Act during which the VA is directed to work with the FAS governments to assess options for the required delivery of care to veterans residing in the FAS. We are very concerned that six months have elapsed without progress on these initiatives, which are so critical to the health of our veterans. The FSM government stands ready to be of any assistance necessary.

We remain hopeful that implementation efforts can move forward expeditiously with all of our federal partners, given the importance and impact of these programs to our citizens. For example, despite our outreach, the Social Security Administration has not provided a timeline on implementation of eligibility of FSM citizens for Supplemental Security Income.

The FSM Government greatly appreciates the Committee's continued commitment to the implementation of the *COFA Amendments Act*, which supports our enduring partnership. We look forward to keeping the Committee informed of implementation developments, and to exploring additional means of bolstering our countries' relationship beyond the Compact, including future military construction commitments and the restoration of the Peace Corps program in the FSM. We hope these endeavors will serve as opportunities for our nations to reaffirm our unique friendship, strong partnership, and mutual commitment to promoting security and stability in the Indo-Pacific region.

Thank you again for holding this hearing on this important topic. I look forward to answering any questions.