Chairwoman Haaland, Ranking Member Young and members of our National Parks, Forests and Public Lands Subcommittee,

Thank you for allowing me to testify today in support of H.R.7045, the bill I have introduced with my colleague, Congresswoman Gabbard, to instruct the United States Forest Service to conduct a study to identify parcels of land that could later be incorporated into a National Forest and help the National Forest System’s fulfill its mission in new ways.

Hawaiʻi is the most isolated island chain and one of the most ecologically diverse places in the world. Within these constrained borders, it has ten of the thirteen world climate zones, ecosystems ranging from the deserts to the tropics where plants and animals that found their way to Hawaiʻi evolved like nowhere else. A 2014 survey identified 9,975 endemic species in Hawaiʻi, many of which are reliant on Hawaii’s fragile ecosystem to survive. However, since the onset of human arrival, Hawaiʻi has lost almost half of its native forest cover. Despite the threats to Hawaii’s unique biodiversity, Hawaiʻi
remains one of a handful of states that does not have a National Forest.

Invasive diseases have also posed a threat to Hawaii’s forests and biodiversity that the Forest Service can help address. The threat to our state tree, the ‘ōhi‘a lehua, is illustrative of our growing crisis. Used for poi boards and outrigger canoes, the ‘ōhi‘a lehua is important to Hawaiian culture and the islands’ watersheds. ‘Ōhi‘a grows throughout the watershed creating new soil, stabilizing steep mountain ridges and comprises approximately 80% of Hawaii’s native forests. However, rapid ‘ōhi‘a death, or ROD, caused by an invasive fungal pathogen, kills ‘ōhi‘a trees quickly, and threatens the stability of Hawaii’s native forests. Since its discovery on the Big Island in 2014, ROD has spread to Kaua‘i, Maui and O‘ahu, and has killed hundreds of thousands of trees. Despite these threats, our federal government does not have a way to adequately protect these tropical forest ecosystems.

The National Forest System offers a way to better manage these forests. The system currently comprises 154 national forests, 20 national grasslands and several other federal land designations
containing 193 million acres. However, it currently does not include any land in Hawai‘i.

The National Forest System could help Hawaii’s forests simply by performing its core mission - to conserve land for a variety of uses to include watershed management, research, cultural site preservation, wildlife habitat management and research and outdoor recreation.

Establishing a National Forest in Hawai‘i would provide research, cultural and commercial opportunities in Hawai‘i. It would expand upon the Hawai‘i Experimental Tropical Forest, by providing greater support for tropical forest conservation and research throughout the Hawaiian Islands. It would provide great public access to lands for recreational activities and cultural practice. It would help Hawai‘i diversity its economy from its reliance on tourism.

My bill provides the first step in establishing a National Forest in Hawai‘i. It would help inventory where Hawaii’s native koa, ‘ōhi‘a and sandalwood forests can be conserved and expanded for cultural and commercial practices. It would help identify where cultural sites could be better conserved and access expanded to the public and
practitioners. It would help provide the basis to bring together local stakeholders to move forward the conversation of how to responsibility establish a National Forest in Hawai‘i in a manner that will benefit both Hawaii’s island communities and the National Forest Service.

I want to thank you again for the opportunity to speak on behalf of my bill. I’m hopeful that this measure will begin the process of establishing the long-overdue first national forest in Hawai‘i and adequately conserving some of the most unique forest resources in our world.

Mahalo.