

Chair Huffman Opening Statement
WOW Subcommittee
Legislative Hearing on HR 160, the *Restoring Resilient Reefs Act of 2021*
May 4, 2021

Good afternoon – and a very early good morning to those of you joining us from all across the Pacific. I am pleased that we have witnesses and representatives with us from Hawai'i, Guam, the Northern Mariana Islands, American Samoa, Puerto Rico, and Florida--representing most of the coral reef hot spots in the United States.

This subcommittee covers a diverse array of foundational ecosystems, and we repeatedly hear that ecosystem after ecosystem is struggling or imperiled. And, in every case, one of the main culprits is climate change. We must act now to reduce the greenhouse gas emissions we are putting into the atmosphere. How many more canary in the coal mine examples do we need?

Since the 1930's, the Gulf Coast has lost coastal wetlands the size of Delaware. In the last century, the world has lost 85 percent of its oyster reefs. My district and much of the west coast has seen massive kelp losses. On the North Coast of California alone, we've lost 90% of bull kelp cover since 2014. This has significantly impacted our coastal ecosystem, and is especially challenging for the many communities and businesses that depend on healthy bull kelp habitat and the fisheries and wildlife it supports.

These kinds of losses in key ecosystems leave our fisheries less resilient and our coastal communities less protected.

So I will continue to work to address the climate crisis. We must do everything in our power to give these ecosystems a fighting chance for the sake of our communities and our planet.

The challenge that brings us together today is the coral reef crisis. Climate change is warming oceans, stressing corals, and causing widespread bleaching events. Ocean acidification is damaging the structural integrity of reefs and stronger, more frequent storms are destroying reef structure too. Coral disease and poor water quality are additional stressors that can lead to coral reef loss.

Coral reefs are key to the health and wellbeing of coastal economies and livelihoods in Florida, Hawai'i, the Caribbean, and Pacific Insular areas. U.S. coral reefs cover more than 4 million acres. These ecosystems support an estimated 25% of all marine life and communities depend on them for storm protection, income, a source of food, recreation, and tourism revenue. Coral reefs are also culturally important to indigenous communities.

Most Americans have heard of the bleaching crisis happening on the Great Barrier Reef, but they have limited awareness of the destruction we are experiencing off our own shores. The third-largest reef tract in the world, extending 300 miles just off the coast of Miami and the Florida Keys, is only at 2 percent coral cover, down from historic levels of 25 to 40 percent. This reef tract is now

suffering from a massive outbreak of stony coral tissue loss disease, which scientists are still working to fully understand and manage.

Over two decades ago, Congress passed the Coral Reef Conservation Act to create conservation, research, and grant programs at NOAA to protect, conserve, and restore our nation's coral reefs. The authorization expired in 2005. It's time for Congress to act again, before it is too late.

Today, we have a bipartisan bill before us, the Restoring Resilient Reefs Act, led by Rep. Soto. This bill would reauthorize and update the Coral Reef Conservation Act. This bill seeks to better address issues of climate change, ecosystem loss, emergencies, and disease outbreaks. It builds on the local, state, and national partnerships fueling coral reef conservation and management activities, and promotes local investments in coral reef management, protection, and restoration. The bill establishes state block grants, which includes the Ruth D. Gates Coral Reef Conservation Grant Program to fund coral reef ecosystem conservation and restoration projects. The bill also creates a new fellowship program to foster a new generation of responsible coral reef stewards, called the Susan L. Williams National Coral Reef Management Fellowship. Both fellowships are named after world renowned marine scientists, but Susan was also constituent of mine, and a scientist and former Director of the Bodega Marine Lab in my district.

There may need to be some changes to this bill, but that is why we are here today, to engage in the legislative process, learn from the invited witnesses, and deliberate the pros and cons. Some preliminary thoughts are that the bill should include measures to ensure that Insular Areas have the flexibility and funding they need to address coral management issues within their jurisdiction, and an overall increase in authorizations to better reflect current and future funding needs.

I am confident this Committee will learn much from today's hearing, and we can make the changes to the bill text necessary to move this legislation forward. I look forward to learning from our expert witnesses, some of whom woke up very early to join us today, and with that, I will turn it over to Ranking Member Bentz for his opening statement.