



April 30, 2021

U.S. House of Representatives
Committee on Natural Resources
Subcommittee on Water, Oceans, and Wildlife
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Chairman Huffman, Ranking Member Bentz, and Committee Members,

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony in support of H.R. 160, *Restoring Resilient Reefs Act of 2021* (Rep. Darren Soto, D-FL), to reauthorize the Coral Reef Conservation Act of 2000 and to establish the United States Coral Reef Task Force, and for other purposes.

Coral reefs in the Pacific have declined drastically over the last several years due to unprecedented thermal stress and bleaching events. Local resource managers are now prioritizing active reef restoration to help maintain vital ecosystem services and build more resilient coral communities to mitigate losses of these vital ecosystem services in the face of ongoing climate change and other stressors.

Overall the bill supports the states and territories in their efforts to protect the reefs which many benefit from. The framework provides opportunities to develop and guide collaborative coral reef conservation efforts. In the past 2 decades, a lot of work has gone into enhancing the work in the states and territories, and all have a greater understanding of the challenges associated with coral reef conservation. Over the years, states and territories have been provided resources and tools from building capacity, addressing problematic watersheds to restoring reefs. Despite these remarkable on-the-ground efforts, we are still losing this battle.

I generally support H.R. 160, however, there are opportunities to strengthen the bill in key areas, and I highlight concerns which I hope will be considered:

Block Grants

The new block grants establish base awards of \$100,000 for each state and territory, but they only provide greater benefit to states that are able to provide match because they have the local funding to qualify for the grants. This may essentially leave out the territories from applying because they do not have the resources and capacity that the states have. Given the pandemic times and our reliance on the tourism economy, we are in no position to identify non-federal expenditures to meet the match requirements in this new funding structure. Under the current framework, the insular areas get matching waivers and an average \$550,000 per year in assistance. Sec. 207 does not include a waiver.

At present, the states and territories are all eligible for full or partial match waivers to the annual grants. Over the past twenty years, all of the states and territories have had grants where they received more federal funds than they were able to match 1:1.

There is no mechanism in the bill for the states and territories that don't have the necessary capacity or available match. If any of the block grant money remains unallocated to the states and territories it gets added to the NFWF grants. Rolling it over into the NFWF Coral Reef Stewardship Fund doesn't guarantee that insular areas will be successful in getting awarded the funding. They still need to compete for the funding. Reverting the block grant funding to NOAA may alleviate some of these issues. NOAA could use that funding to continue to fully fund and conduct technical assistance activities or use that funding to issue national grants to the states and territories without taking funding away from the states and territories especially the insular areas. This should be revisited, and cooperative agreements should remain intact.

When it all adds up, H.R.160 provides less coral conservation resources to the states and territories than other reauthorizing bills previously introduced. Funding for coral reef protection and conservation programs should be increasing.

Department of the Interior:

Previous bills included funding for a coral reef initiative program in the Office of Insular Affairs and for coral reef work to be funded by Interior. H.R. 160 allows for the creation of a coral reef initiative program but no funding authorization were included. While authorization of appropriations is not required for a program to secure appropriations, this does not guarantee that appropriations will be provided for a program.

Cooperative Institutes:

The language is vague, one in the Atlantic and one in the Pacific at a coral reef research center that the Administrator will designate. Language should be included to seek input of resource managers on other centers to be considered within their reach.

The research conducted by the institutes should be driven by management or at the very least, managers should be given a leadership role. In the past, much research has been conducted but they are not necessarily applicable or helpful for resource managers.

Pros:

- The bill creates an emergency fund to improve capacity for disaster response, as well as for the development of coral reef emergency response plans.
- A National Coral Management Fellowship is established/codified
- Codifies the US Coral Reef Task Force for the first time since its establishment in 1998.

Value of Coral Reef Funds to Conservation in Guam and CNMI:

In Guam and CNMI, tremendous work is being done to address the impacts to coral reefs. Both jurisdictions are working on coral restoration but also working in watersheds to address land-based sources of pollution in areas adjacent to coral reefs. Funding also greatly increases our capacity to be able to do good work and engage in coral reef conservation, and it provides us the tools we need to address the threats to our reefs.

The coral reef funds restored a watershed in Rota, CNMI for a 10-year period. This not only created jobs in conservation, but it increased awareness for the communities. In the 10-year period, volunteers put 300,000 plants into the ground at this watershed. This minimized soil erosion and sedimentation run-off into the adjacent reefs. As healthy soil accumulates, volunteers also plant native trees that will ultimately spread into native forest, providing habitat for birds and other wildlife. In the dry season, Field Surveillance agents watch over the land to help prevent fires that can ruin years of hard work. The “No Burn” Campaign has been providing educational materials to residents about the importance of the Talakhaya Watershed and the extensive damage caused by burning.



In CNMI, a comprehensive sustainable development plan was recently adopted with goals to address sustainable use of ocean resources, climate action and sustainable uses of terrestrial and nearshore marine resources.

Coral reef monitoring continues to be a high priority in light of rapid development growth in CNMI. Consistent monitoring provides status and trends of CNMI's reefs.



CNMI's coral reef summer internship started in 2003 has become very popular amongst student graduating from high school and entering post-secondary schools. The internship provides hands-on experiences to encourage students to major in natural resource management, environmental science, or conservation. This year alone surpassed the average applicant pool 12 to 43, and at least 7 former interns have been placed in a resource management agency upon completing their college education.



Guam

In Guam, the SCUBA Spearfish Ban was recent enacted into law and supported by a fisheries study funded under NOAA coral reef grant. A copy of the study can be found at this [link](#).



A new initiative chaired by the Governor and Lt. Governor called the Guam Green Growth aligns with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals was launched in 2020 with the most comprehensive action framework created for Guam to address goals for Life Below Water, Life on Land and Climate Action.



Two coral nurseries have been established on Guam and the nurseries house >2,500 fragments from eight species growing on 21 trees and other structures, started from resilient surviving populations. Guam is experimenting with additional propagation methods and adding fragments from additional source populations as they are found.



Additionally, the Guam Reef Restoration and Intervention Partnership (GRRIP) was formed and is a local team of scientists, managers, volunteers, and other concerned citizens who are interested in active conservation of Guam's coral reefs. Various coral cultivation techniques continue to be employed to grow corals quickly and securely in the coral nurseries before they reach a stable size and are ready for outplanting to degraded reefs around Guam.



Islands contribute the least to the causes of climate change, yet we experience the brunt of its impacts in the form of frequent and severe storm events, droughts, flooding, and coral bleaching. In Guam, the Governor established a Climate Change Resiliency Commission. The commission's objective is to develop a strategy to build resiliency against the adverse effects of climate change and to reduce contributing factors such as greenhouse emissions. We are seeing the harmful effects of climate change right here on our island, from erosion to brush fires, degradation of coral reefs, pollution, scarce agricultural resources, and increasing intensity of natural disasters. This initiative will coordinate our response to climate change and will institute meaningful policies that will protect our natural resources and environment.

The Guam Restoration of Watersheds (GROW):

In order to build island resilience against these changing conditions, local environmental stressors must be reduced. On small high islands such as Guam, land-based pollutants need only travel short distances via storm water runoff to reach a water body that can impact water supplies the ocean and harm marine life. As such, Guam Sea Grant is taking a watershed approach (a.k.a Ridge to Reef approach) to improve watershed health, and coastal ecosystems through the Guam Restoration of Watersheds (GROW) Initiative.



Conclusion

Generally, the bill improves direct support and funds for the management of coral reefs in the states and territories, formalizes the role of coral reef restoration as a major aspect of coral conservation work, and provides new avenues for federal funding during coral reef emergencies and disasters.

The bill recognizes the building of capacity in the coral jurisdictions in partnership with federal agencies, and investing people are a major need if conservation policies have any chance of being implemented effectively.



I understand there are concerns about the bill from insular areas regarding the matching requirement under the block grants, but we can work together to resolve these issues.

To end, coral reefs provide economic goods and services to coastal communities, including protection from flood damage. They are worth about \$3.4 billion each year, 500 million people depend on reefs for food, income, recreation, and a recent study reveals how valuable coral reefs are in protecting people, structures, and economic activity in the U.S. from coastal flooding during storms. Yet, despite all these benefits that coral reefs provide to communities, the funding levels appropriated for coral reef protection is just not equal to the services they provide. Reefs are a way of life for our communities, and we depend on it.

I commend the timely action taken by the Subcommittee and Sponsors of H.R. 160. This bill has been through many versions since its expiration, and I'm honored to submit a testimony and excited for this giant step forward in coral reef conservation.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'FRAN CASTRO', with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

FRAN CASTRO
Associate Director
University of Guam Sea Grant