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Governor Lemanu Testifies Before the U.S. House Committee on Natural Resources for the Fiscal Year 2023 Budget Request of the Department of the Interior's Office of Insular Affairs.

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"Governor Lemanu briefly touched on the presence of the Chinese in the South Pacific."

In a Virtual oversight hearing held on May 18, 2022, Honorable Governor Lemanu Mauga testified before the U.S. House Committee on Natural Resources for the Fiscal Year 2023 (FY 23) Budget Request of the Department of the Interior's Office of Insular Affairs.

Governor Lemanu's full testimony covered the following key areas in detail: healthcare, COVID-19 Pandemic, information technology, shipyard, climate change, infrastructure, and the threat of China's presence in the South Pacific. In his brief commentary before the House, Governor Lemanu focused on the current state of LBJ, the shipyard, and climate change.

He explained that during the 2019 assessment by the Army Corps of Engineers, they reported that the LBJ medical facility was "not in compliance with current seismic and wind requirements and suggested that rather than repair or retrofit the current facility, construction of a new hospital would be more advantageous." He added that the hospital is now "diverting its limited operating resources to address the COVID-19 pandemic, causing the potential for shortages of medication essential health supplies, equipment, doctors, nurses, workforce, and overcrowded old hospital building."

On the issue of the COVID-19 pandemic in the Territory, Governor Lemanu stated that American Samoa had remained COVID-free until September 2021. As repatriation flights began, the first positive case was a returning resident from Hawaii. To date, the total cases are "now a total of over 5,800, with 109 of those being active cases, and 30 reported deaths."

As Governor Lemanu touched on the threat of climate change to the Territory's infrastructure. "Major infrastructure damage results from sea-level rise, severe floods, coastal erosion, and

landslides.” He continued by stating, “American Samoa is subsiding at a rate roughly six times the global sea-level rise average, and experiencing a relative sea-level rise of 9.8 inches in eleven years (from Sept. 2009- Jan. 2020).”

In closing, Governor Lemanu briefly touched on the presence of the Chinese in the South Pacific. “China has been raising increasing concerns in the South Pacific through its aggressive and illegal fishing activities; its disregard of the exclusive economic zones of island communities; its use of aid to gain influence and facilitate espionage in the region; and its increased militarism near important shipping routes.” Governor Lemanu asks the Committee to consider this issue as they continue to finalize the FY 23 budget.

Also testifying before the U.S. House Committee, Mr. Michael Sobolik, a fellow in Indo-Pacific Studies at American Foreign Policy Council, testified on China’s growing interest in the South Pacific. He stated that the DOI/OIA’s budget request for FY 23 focuses on climate change resilience, conservation, and renewable energy. However, he wanted to remind the Committee that the President of the United States has a legal and moral obligation and to consider “the rise of the People’s Republic of China.” He stated, “The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) views these islands through the prism of its broader geopolitical gambit – namely, to leverage its economic dominance and sideline the United States. From 2007 to 2017, Chinese trade with Pacific Island nations grew by a factor of four. China has also poured foreign direct investment into the region as it pulls more and more nations into its global Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).”

The DOI/OIA Director of Budget, Mr. Jonathan Dunn, also testified before the Committee, stating that the “proposed fiscal year 2023 OIA budget totals \$736.1 million, an increase of \$6.9 million from the 2022 enacted appropriations.” He continued, “the request for current appropriations for 2023 is \$125.7 million. This amount is an increase of \$3.8 million from the 2022 enacted appropriation. Included in this current appropriation request are \$98.0 million in discretionary funding and \$27.7 million in mandatory funding.”

In closing, Governor Lemanu thanked Chairman Grijalva, Ranking Member Westerman, Vice-Chair Sablan, and distinguished members of the Committee for this opportunity to comment on the FY '23 budget for the Office of Insular Affairs at the Department of the Interior. “We also want to thank our Congresswoman High Chief Uifa’atali Radewagen for her work, not only for our territory but also for all territories within this Committee’s purview.”

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Governor Lemanu P.S. Mauga delivered his testimony during a virtual hearing before the U.S. House Committee on Natural Resources on May 18, 2022. [Photo Credit: Office of the Governor]