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Public Comment Requested on the Transfer of Submerged Lands to the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands

Washington D.C - The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, in cooperation with NOAA Fisheries and the Commonwealth of Northern Mariana Islands Government, is requesting public comment on a Draft Environmental Assessment for the proposed Marianas Trench Marine National Monument Northern Islands Submerged Lands Transfer to the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands. The Draft EA was developed in cooperation with the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration and the CNMI Government. The public comment period is open from May 4 – June 6, 2016.

“This Draft Environmental Assessment is the product of true cooperation and partnership between the CNMI Government and our federal counterparts, NOAA and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and is one that I believe is in best interest of the CNMI people and the proper conservation of our precious resources in the Northern Islands,” said Governor Ralph Torres. “I thank all those involved in this process up to this point and I encourage the community to review this document and submit comments during this period.”

Two alternatives are proposed in the Draft EA: a no transfer alternative and a preferred alternative that would result in the U.S. Department of the Interior conveying the submerged lands to the CNMI Government through a patent with a conservation easement that would continue to protect the submerged lands as part of the Monument.

The draft released today includes a Memorandum of Agreement outlining roles and responsibilities of the CNMI Government, NOAA Fisheries, and the Service for protecting the Monument and managing the submerged lands. It also includes the patent, which would ultimately transfer the land to CNMI after 60-days of Congressional review.

“The Monument is home to many different important species. The coral ecosystems that ring the islands of Farallon de Pajaros (Uracas), Maug, and Asuncion contain the widest diversity of stony corals in the Western Pacific,” said the Service’s Pacific Region Regional Director Robyn Thorson. “The Service is committed to working with the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration and the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands to manage the biological resources of the Monument.”

The submerged lands are among some of the most biologically diverse in the Western Pacific Ocean, with relatively pristine coral reef ecosystems that have been proclaimed objects of scientific interest and reserved for their protection as part of the Monument’s Islands Unit, by Presidential Proclamation 8335.

The Monument was established for the purpose of protecting the submerged volcanic areas of the Mariana Ridge; the marine environment around the islands of Farallon de Pajaros (Uracas), Maug, and Asuncion in the CNMI; and the Mariana Trench.

“NOAA Fisheries closely collaborated with our partners in this process and look forward to continuing strong relationships as we work together to keep these incredible underwater natural resources sustainable and resilient,” said Michael Tosatto, NOAA Fisheries Pacific Islands regional administrator.

The Draft EA is available for public review and comment here:

http://www.fws.gov/refuge/mariana_trench_marine_national_monument/

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