

United States Coral Reef Task Force Presentation  
Governor Togiola T.A. Tulafono  
February 25, 2009

Talofa and good morning, Co-chairs, USCRTF members, Ladies and Gentlemen, invited guests, members of the public, etc...

I would like to take this opportunity to thank you for the invitation to speak today about the importance of US Coral Reef Task Force in providing opportunities and confronting challenges facing a territory, such as American Samoa. We are the most southern of the jurisdictions at this table, with 5 volcanic islands and 2 atolls in the central South Pacific Ocean. Our islands are small, ranging in size from the heavily populated main island of Tutuila to the uninhabited, remote, and now National Marine Monument of Rose Atoll. The volcanic islands are entirely coastal, and are surrounded by fringing reefs which are home to more than 2,700 species of corals, fish, invertebrates, marine plants, turtles and marine mammals. We have approximately five times the number of coral species as Hawaii, or the entire Caribbean.

Unfortunately, despite being amongst the most resilient and diverse on the planet, coral reefs face a number of key threats in American Samoa, including major disturbances such as mass coral bleaching events, hurricanes, crown of thorns starfish and extreme low tide events. Compounded with a fast growing population, and the associated increases in land-based pollution, sedimentation, piggeries, land development, and the lack of proper sewage treatment –we face not just challenging times but the need to accelerate actions to address these impacts immediately. Our oceans are changing, and coral reef fish populations, particularly around Tutuila, have low biomass and few large fish species are found. Our climate is changing, the waters are warming, and the sea levels are rising. We have documented what we believe to be the first multiple species coral community in the world which is bleaching annually. Climate models tell us that this annual bleaching is not expected to occur for decades, but in American Samoa, the future is now, we live it every day.

We are facing numerous other threats to our resources, and to our culture, as well. Clearly, the challenges are great, and the threats are urgent, but American Samoa is a small territory of only 69,000 people. We have no University, we have no environmental NGOs, we have no research stations, and we have a very limited amount of staff to manage coral and coastal resources, and to address the concerns and threats I have just touched upon.

And so how do we adequately manage our coral reefs, in the face of such threats, and in spite of all of these seemingly overwhelming obstacles? The answer to this situation is the USCRTF, which has afforded us the opportunity to receive exceptional science and monitoring expertise via a number of successful collaborative, projects and program activities. Being a member of the Task Force has provided American Samoa with a forum to engage the scientific community and to devise collaborative solutions to pressing issues. We are also provided with a means to cooperate with government agencies, nongovernmental organizations, and commercial interests to further the understanding and conservation of our coral reef ecosystems. The USCRTF has been instrumental in building partnerships and strategies for on-the-ground action to preserve and protect coral reef ecosystems.

In addition to the knowledge gained and partnerships developed, the USCRTF provides American Samoa with a voice to engage the wider coral reef community as well as a strategic system to allow for local management of issues albeit within a wider internationally-based system.

For example, the implementation of our local action strategies has allowed us to target key threats in a meaningful and deliberate manner. The LAS process helps to streamline priorities and foster collaboration within jurisdictions. However, the LAS approach is also flexible enough for us to address local threats unique to American Samoa as well, such as Population Pressure. Crucial to the LAS is the ideal of 'local' – each territory has its own culture, its own issues, and its own solutions. This inherent flexibility enabled us to host our first ever territorial Population Summit, to engage lawmakers in immigration reform, and to begin educating the public on reproductive health issues. We are the only state or territory in the United States tackling population issues in the context of an environmental framework.

But this is but one success story. There are others. However, we have a long way to go. Climate change is not going away. Overharvested fish stocks will not recover in one or two years. Land-based pollution is not going to disappear with the arrival of a new administration. Coral reefs around the world are facing a bleak future, yet I remain eternally hopeful. Through the work of the USCRTF, and its partner agencies and members, we all can tackle these issues if we start now, together, with a common vision.

We arrive at this meeting optimistic that the new administration in Washington brings with it a chance for renewed determination, renewed enthusiasm, and, most importantly, a renewed sense of urgency to address the coral crisis facing our people, and our culture. The days of talking about change are over. Much like the annual coral bleaching in American Samoa, change has already arrived. It is here with us now, and it is up to us to respond. It is clear that the USCRTF, along with its partners, must significantly increase our collective effort to address the factors over which we can, and must, exercise control. The USCRTF must take immediate action to respond to these threats and, in turn, seek to sustain our coral reef ecosystems and the communities that depend upon them.

Later this afternoon, I will be testifying along with some of my fellow governors at the House Committee Hearing in support of the CRCA reauthorization. As one of the senior governors actively engaged and longest serving on the USCRTF, I am proud of our accomplishments in partnership with the federal government. However, we still have a long way to go and I encourage the new administration to be even more engaged with the implementation of the Local Action Strategies. We need to be able to sustain the momentum to date, and to explore new ways to improve the implementation of our mandate. I welcome the new members of the USCRTIF and I look forward to working with you in the coming months and years ahead.