



COMMONWEALTH OF THE NORTHERN MARIANA ISLANDS
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NEWS RELEASE

December 21, 2016

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Marianas Trench Marine National Monument Northern Islands Submerged Lands Transferred to the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands

Saipan, MP – Today, the Government of the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands received a patent to submerged lands extending three geographical miles seaward from the mean high tide of the islands of Farallon de Pajaros (Uracas), Maug and Asuncion within the Marianas Trench Marine National Monument. Secretary of the Interior Sally Jewell signed the patent on November 30, 2016, to convey the submerged lands from the United States to CNMI. Governor Ralph DLG. Torres also signed the patent in Capital Hill, Saipan, officially accepting the conveyance of the submerged lands to the CNMI Government.

"Today is a great day for the people of the Northern Mariana Islands. Years of close collaboration between the CNMI, the US Fish and Wildlife Service and NOAA have resulted in the return of an integral part of our cultural heritage. This transfer strengthens our shared dedication to sustain our unique natural resources for years to come and for our children and grandchildren to benefit. I want to thank the great people at the US Fish and Wildlife Service and NOAA Fisheries for their hard work, and I look forward to continuing this strong relationship together as we move forward on managing our submerged lands," said Governor Torres.

The conveyance of submerged lands to CNMI provides the local government authority over the seabed, subsoil, water column and surface water resources in the three-mile coastal zone, including mineral rights, subject to the recently signed memorandum of agreement and terms of the patent.

In September 2016, CNMI, the Department of Commerce and the Department of the Interior formally established a memorandum of agreement, defining the terms and conditions for the coordination of management of the Northern Islands Submerged Lands. The MOA also lays out roles and responsibilities of the CNMI Government, NOAA Fisheries and USFWS for the preservation and protection of the natural resources of the Monument.

"The submerged lands that ring the islands of Farallon de Pajaros (Uracas), Maug, and Asuncion protect a flourishing, healthy, and diverse ecosystem, said USFWS Director Dan Ashe. "The Service is committed to continuing to work with the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands and NOAA Fisheries to manage the biological resources of the Monument."

Farallon de Pajaros (Uracas), Maug, and Asuncion are among the most biologically diverse in the Western Pacific, with relatively pristine coral reef ecosystems that have been proclaimed objects of scientific interest and reserved for their protection as the Islands Unit of the Marianas Trench Marine National Monument, established by Presidential Proclamation No. 8335 on Jan. 6, 2009. That proclamation assigned management responsibility for the Monument to the Secretary of the Interior, in consultation with the Secretary of Commerce.

“This land transfer is a tangible example of collaboration among federal agencies and territorial governments to protect precious natural resources of scientific interest for future generations,” said Eileen Sobeck, Assistant NOAA Administrator for NOAA Fisheries.

The Territorial Submerged Lands Act (Public Law 93-435), which became law in 1974, two years before CNMI became a U.S. Commonwealth, did not include CNMI. Until Congress amended that statute (Public Law 113-34 (Sept. 17, 2013), CNMI was the only populated U.S. territory that did not have title to the submerged lands in that portion of the United States territorial sea. The law also provided the President of the United States the authority to withhold the transfer of some or all of these submerged lands for reasons of national interest, including defense preparedness and environmental protection.

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