

**Statement of Esther P. Kiaaina  
Nominee for the Position of  
Assistant Secretary for Insular Areas  
U.S. Department of the Interior  
Before the  
U.S. Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources**

**November 14, 2013**

Chairman Wyden, Ranking Member Murkowski, and Committee Members. It is an honor to be before your committee as President Obama's nominee for Assistant Secretary of Insular Areas at the Department of the Interior.

I regret that my mother, due to health reasons, is unable to be with me today, as well as my siblings who help to take care of her. I know they are here in spirit. I am heartened to have my extended family of friends from Hawaii, the Pacific, and Washington, D.C., here to support me today.

My name is Esther Puakela Kia'aina from Nanakuli, Oahu. While my parents are originally from Hawaii, I was born at the U.S. Naval Hospital on the island of Guam as my father worked for the U.S. Navy in a civilian capacity. My initial years were spent in the village of Asan, where I lived right across from Asan Beach, which was the location where the 3<sup>rd</sup> Marine Division landed during the liberation of Guam from enemy forces during World War II.

My family and I then moved to the village of Mangilao near the University of Guam. I am a proud graduate of San Vicente Elementary and Junior High School. Those formative years were some of the best years of my life. I still remember with fondness and gratitude the guidance and support of the School Sisters of Notre Dame nuns who helped to shape my views of the world. These nuns were Sister Mary Bernard, Sister Mary Joseph, Sister Mary Juan, Sister Fidelis, and Sister Rosine. Si Yu'us Ma'ase sisters for all that you have done for me.

They led me to believe that the world was full of opportunities and allowed me to dream -- through our lessons on U.S. history -- of visiting Washington, D.C. one day to learn about what our founding fathers fought for and why democracy was so important to our nation and the world.

Apart from learning about Chamorro culture while growing up on Guam, my family always had close ties to the Micronesian community as my parents owned and operated a business that was one of the larger employers for the Micronesian communities, especially the Chuukese. Trying to eke out a living for themselves or their families, we felt our employee's challenges and we felt their dreams and aspirations.

I could not have envisioned the opportunity of being here today to be considered for a post that will oversee the coordination of federal policy and financial assistance toward the U.S. territories and freely associated states, and to give back to a region that has been so good to me and my family.

Of course, I would not be here without the values of respect and hard work of my parents and their sacrifice to send me to Hawaii for high school, college in California and Japan, and graduate and law school in Washington, D.C.

I was also fortunate to have a successful career on Capitol Hill, starting off as a volunteer intern for Senator Daniel Inouye, then working my way up to Legislative Assistant for Senator Daniel Akaka, and Chief of Staff for Congressmen Robert Underwood and Ed Case.

During my Congressional career, I worked specifically on issues for the U.S. Territories and Freely Associated States and worked with the Senate Energy and Natural Resources and the House Resources Committees.

Laws or programs that I worked on included: the Guam Land Return Act, the Compact-Impact Reimbursement Act, the Brown Tree Snake Control and Eradication Act, the Guam War Claims Review Commission Act, the Guam Foreign Investment Equity Act, the inclusion of the territories in the New Markets Tax Initiative, the inclusion of Pacific Islanders, including citizens of the Freely Associated States, in the Gates Millennium Scholarship Program, and the establishment of Asian and Pacific Islander Higher Education Serving Institutions.

My current job as the First Deputy for Hawaii's Department of Land and Natural Resources has also afforded me an opportunity to better understand Hawaii's role in working with the insular areas on collaborative efforts on issues such as climate change, invasive species, and coral reef protection. Most recently, we were pleased to sign on to the Majuro Declaration, which aims to intensify efforts to prepare for, and adapt to, the intensifying impacts of climate change.

I believe I have a good understanding of the continuing need to strengthen bilateral federal relationships with each jurisdiction, promote economic development, increase government efficiency and transparency, foster sound natural resources management practices, advance alternative energy goals, and improve quality of life issues.

Finally, I have appreciated the opportunity to meet with the Members of this committee and their staff while I've been in town, and enjoyed discussing issues impacting the U.S. territories, and the freely associated states, including, but not limited to economic development, climate change,

energy costs, immigration and compact impacts, and authorizing the financial agreement with Palau.

Should I be confirmed as Assistant Secretary for Insular Areas, I commit to working to advance these issues in concert with island leaders, the Congressional committees of jurisdiction, Interior's leadership team, and other federal agencies.

I appreciate this opportunity to share my statement.