



U.S. All Islands
Coral Reef
Committee (AIC)

Chair's Report

October 2015
Fajardo, Puerto Rico

U.S. Coral Reef Jurisdictions
and Freely Associated States
PRIORITIES and UPDATES

AIC CHAIR'S REPORT

34th U.S. Coral Reef Task Force Meeting
Fajardo, Puerto Rico | October 26-30, 2015

AIC Vision

Thriving coral reef ecosystems, effectively managed to protect their ecological, social, and economic value for future generations.

AIC Mission

To be a unified voice for the effective management of coral reef ecosystems in the U.S. and Freely Associated States.

Cover photo courtesy of Dr. Héctor Ruiz.

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From the Chair

Hafa adai, Talofa, Aloha, Hola, and Hello,

It is my pleasure, on behalf of the U.S. All Islands Coral Reef Committee (AIC), to present this report on our activities, accomplishments, and emerging issues since our last meeting in Washington D.C. in February 2015. We would like to welcome our members and principals and extend our sincere thanks to Governor Alejandro García Padilla, his Department of Natural and Environmental Resources, and the people of Puerto Rico for hosting us at this meeting.

In the few months since we last met, our jurisdictions and islands have faced extraordinary events that have impacted coral reefs and strained our resources and capacity. The strong El Niño has resulted in both increased storm activity as well as substantial coral bleaching. At the end of March, Typhoon Maysak's destructive winds caused damage on several islands in Chuuk and reaching Yap's Ulithi Atoll and Fais Island as a super typhoon. CNMI continues to recover from Typhoon Soudelor, which hit in early August leaving Saipan without electricity or water for nearly three months in some areas. Just the other week the CNMI got hit with Tropical Storm Champi, which caused more damage and power loss. The jurisdictions have seen coral bleaching on reefs just barely recovering from last year's bleaching event. Reports of bleaching from all across the Main Hawaiian Islands came in as early as September, as a result of water temperatures up to 91° F. Florida is dealing with an unprecedented coral disease outbreak – the largest ever seen on the FL Reef Tract.

We must work together to make a difference **now**.

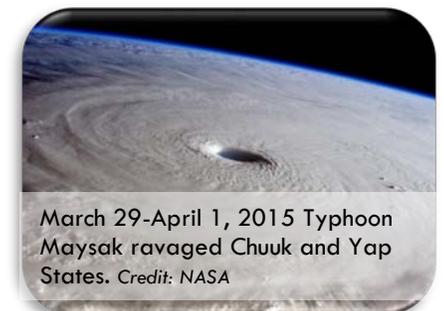
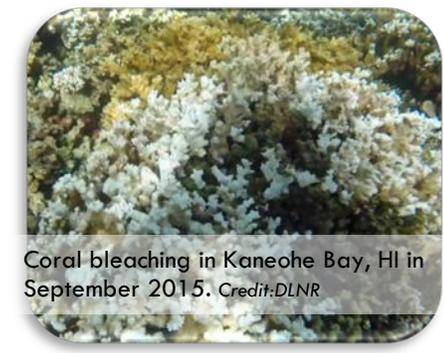
The U.S. Coral Reef Task Force offers a huge and unique opportunity for jurisdictions and federal agencies to work together to strengthen partnerships, increase integration, ensure outcomes are resource-focused, and protect and conserve our coral reefs for future generations.

We are excited to participate in this 34th meeting of the U.S. Coral Reef Task Force as we finalize a Watershed Partnership Initiative Strategy, adopt Resolution 34.1, and most importantly build a strategic and focused roadmap forward for the next five years.

Sincerely,



Fran Castro
AIC Chair



AIC Coral Reef Points of Contact (POC)

We would like to thank **Emma Anders** (Hawai'i POC since 2012) and **Lorilee Crisostomo** (Guam POC since 2014) for their service to the AIC and dedication to ensuring thriving coral reef ecosystems, effectively managed to protect their ecological, social, and economic value for present and future generations.

We would like to introduce two new POCs that have joined the AIC since the last Task Force meeting.

GUAM: William (Wil) Castro has been appointed by Governor Calvo as the new Coral Reef Point of Contact for Guam. William is Director of Guam's Bureau of Statistics and Plans and Special Assistant for Research, Planning and Technology in the Office of the Governor.

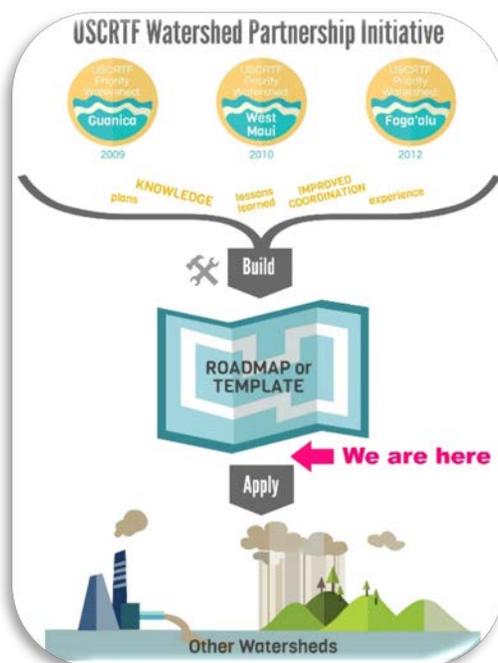
HAWAII: Ray Uchimura has been appointed as the interim Coral Reef Point of Contact by Suzanne Case, Chair of Hawaii's Department of Land and Natural Resources. Ray is a contract specialist with the Department's Division of Aquatic Resources.

OVERARCHING PRIORITIES

Our two overarching priorities cross-cut each of the seven jurisdictions' local priorities:

- **Achievable and shared site-based and resource-focused outcomes; and**
- **Integrated and strengthened federal-local partnerships.**

JURISDICTIONAL PRIORITIES: Task Force Follow-up



Watershed Partnership Initiative

This Initiative hosts the Task Force's most successful, place-based partnership projects. Collaborative efforts in each priority watershed have helped to build a template and framework for effective watershed management and conservation. This Initiative is a great example of how the Task Force can be effective at the local level in projects that result in positive measurable changes to our coral reefs.

While this Initiative doesn't necessarily come with additional funding, it is an extraordinary opportunity for local watersheds to gain visibility and attention at the national level within the Task Force. This attention has resulted in increased participation and collaboration by various Task Force agencies, which has led to increased capacity at these sites.

The Watershed Partnership Initiative Strategy provides meaningful background and clarity in meeting strategic planning goals and guiding activities. It identifies the intent of new priority watersheds and building capacity in other jurisdictional watersheds.

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Building on the Strategy document, understanding the intent of this Initiative to demonstrate ecological improvement in USCRTF priority watersheds via focus for a minimum in 5 years, and understanding that it's not the intent of the Task Force or Initiative to focus on a particular watershed forever, the AIC offers this recommendation for consideration:

The Task Force **create a "Graduation Plan" for every USCRTF priority watershed**, which would include reviewing management plan implementation, progress, and accomplishments/metrics. We also recommend that **all sites have a "sunset clause" of forced graduation in 10 years and that emphasis be placed on reaching meaningful ecological improvements in less time.**

Increasing Federal-Jurisdictional Integration

With the Task Force's strategic planning effort underway and an increased focus on outcomes at the resource level, there is a need for a strengthened and more effective federal-jurisdictional partnership, and greater integration across the USCRTF.



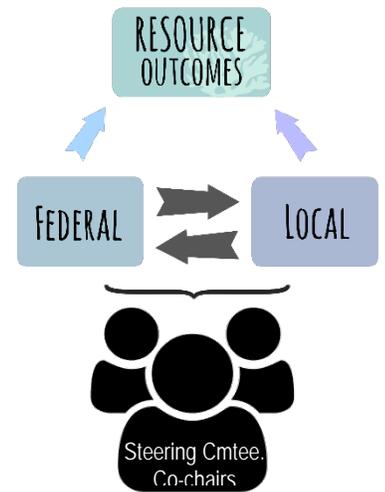
Increasing Effective Communications

A fairly simple way to increase integration is through greater and more effective communications. With that intent in mind the AIC requested Task Force consideration for adding a ½ day meeting on jurisdictional management priorities and updates at D.C. winter meetings and a ½ day meeting on federal agency updates at jurisdictional fall meetings.

We request consideration of this proposal for **implementation during the February 2016 meeting**, once strategic planning has been completed.

AIC Representative as 3rd co-chair of the USCRTF Steering Committee

At the September 2014 USCRTF Meeting on Maui, we requested Task Force consideration of our Secretariat Executive Director (Sec ED) as the 3rd co-chair of the USCRTF Steering Committee. We believe this a meaningful opportunity and are **looking for creative ways to build on the positive efforts of the USCRTF and strengthen the federal-jurisdiction partnership through better integration.**

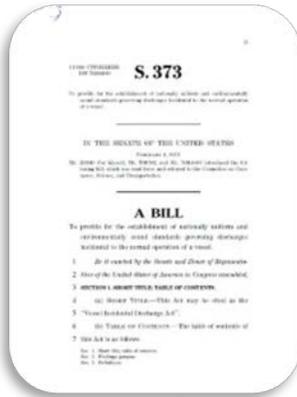


We received a formal response from the Task Force co-chairs during the Business Meeting of the 33rd USCRTF meeting. The co-chairs explained that the AIC Sec ED could not serve as a Steering Committee co-chair because that person is not a designee of any federal agency or state or territorial Governor. In May, we offered a potential solution in requesting Task Force consideration for an amendment to the USCRTF Charter for the AIC Chair, currently Fran Castro, to be a 3rd co-chair of the Steering Committee.

The Steering Committee is a non-voting, non-mandated guidance body to the USCRTF. Given limited resources and the desire to integrate federal and jurisdictional issues, the AIC feels a **broader management framework at the Steering Committee level is key to continuing to look for ways to strengthen partnership.** Should the AIC request for the Chair to serve as the third

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Co-chair not be acceptable, we would ask the Co-chairs to provide recommended options to address this concern.



Vessel Incidental Discharge Act (S. 373)

We sent a formal letter to the Task Force co-chairs in July requesting Task Force attention to the Vessel Incidental Discharge Act. As written, we believe this Act undercuts efforts to protect, preserve, and restore coral reefs by allowing discharges known to negatively affect water quality and the health of coral reefs within U.S. waters.

The AIC fully recognized, in sending a letter to the co-chairs, that coordination on issues is typically managed through the Steering Committee to Task Force membership. However, in this case there were a couple key differences. Given the time sensitivity, it did not make sense for all seven jurisdictions to send inquiries or letters to each of the federal members or to enter into a USCRTF Steering Committee process. Because of the importance of this issue and relevance to coral reef conservation and protection, the request by the AIC was for a co-chair decision to take action and coordinate at the Task Force member level.

Again, this seems like a logical USCRTF co-chair management issue. Therefore, **we suggest discussion during the Business Meeting or Executive Session on how crises issues needing timely decision are best served and establishing a protocol for such situations.**

USCRTF Strategic Planning

At the February 2015 meeting, the AIC requested Task Force consider planning for a more strategic direction and results-oriented focus.

We greatly appreciate the consideration and are **pleased that the Task Force is moving forward in strategic planning.** Thank you to everyone who has been involved, particularly the members of the Tiger Shark Team.



AIC STRATEGIC PLAN

During a half day AIC Meeting held on Monday, October 26, the AIC finalized their Strategic Plan for the next five years (2016-2020). The finalization of the plan is based on the consensus of the seven voting POCs with input and feedback from affiliate members and the Secretariat. Final formatting of the plan will be completed in the following month and the plan, once final, will be made available to those interested.

Concurrently, the AIC has been working on a draft internal Action Plan. The Action Plan is intended to be a dynamic working document and as such is maintained as a separate document from the AIC Strategic Plan. The AIC hopes to finalize the first version of this plan by early 2016.

Another big thank you to Karen Koltes, Jennifer Koss, Jennifer Moore, and Trina Leberer who took the time to provide very thoughtful and helpful edits, comments, and suggestions for improvement and clarification of our plan.

AIC MEMBER UPDATES

American Samoa

American Samoa is facing multiple ongoing major coral reef ecosystem threats. After 4 years of COTS eradication (and over 15,000 killed), we are still consistently finding outbreak sites. In combination with the predicted coral beaching this season, our scientists are predicting major coral death. Other threats, such as a ship grounding in a territorial priority watershed, are also straining our staff and resources. Better mechanism to quickly respond to coral threats are needed to assist in faster response times to better protect these essential ecosystems.



The Rain Garden Team, comprised of Community members, Village mayors, local and Federal Agency staff and Horsley Whitten Group, after the completion of the Faga'alu Rain Garden Installation in August. Credit: Coral Reef Advisory Group, August 26, 2015

has been identified to expand this effective storm water management practice to other watersheds.

Updates:

- A longline fishing vessel ran aground in Nuuli in May and continues to cause major harm to coral reef ecosystems. Funding and technical assistance for removal are needed.
- The Crown of Thorns Outbreak in American Samoa is ongoing, with patchy outbreaks along the north shore of Tutuila. Interagency removal and mitigation efforts are ongoing.
- Faga'alu installed American Samoa's first Rain Garden in August. Multiple Communities were trained, and funding

Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands

Coral reef resources in the CNMI were severely impacted by consecutive thermal stress events in 2013 and 2014. Recent surveys indicate that approximately 85% of staghorn corals at long-term monitoring sites in the Saipan Lagoon have died. Low diversity, shallow-water coral assemblages across the remote northern islands suffered similar fates.

This year, El Niño conditions resulted in a hyperactive typhoon season with several named Typhoons impacting the waters of Saipan, Tinian, and Rota. The eye of Typhoon Soudelor (strong category 3) passed directly over Saipan causing severe and widespread damages across the island. Preliminary assessments indicate that while some reefs were severely impacted by the storm, damages appear to be highly spatially heterogeneous. In addition to damages from wave energy, the storm resulted in one ship grounding on coral reef habitat and damages to seagrass habitat were incurred from various storm related debris.

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Garapan Conservation Action Plan Meeting with agency heads and legislators, Pacific Island Club Saipan, March 11-12, 2015. Credit: Jimmy Blanca, Media

Updates:

- Garapan Conservation Action Planning Meeting was held in March to review and revise the Garapan CAP. Workshop participants included agency heads and legislators to discuss strategies to improve conservation in this priority watershed.
- The work of the CNMI Marine Monitoring Team contributed to four published scientific papers in 2015.
- All products and recommendations resulting from the CNMI Reef Resilience

Study have been finalized and published including technical reports for the CNMI government and NOAA and a peer-reviewed paper.



One of over 40 bleached and/or diseased massive corals (3 meters+) found offshore southeast Florida – September 2015. Credit: Brian Walker, Nova Southeastern University

Florida

South Florida is currently experiencing an unprecedented outbreak of coral diseases leading to significant mortality of multiple coral species over 165 square miles of the Florida Reef Tract. Due to a lack of emergency funding mechanisms, assessing the scale and severity of this outbreak as well as attempting to identify any potential primary and/or secondary causes (in order to understand how to avoid future outbreaks) has been severely limited. As local and global stress events are increasing in frequency and severity, it challenges us to establish a more effective way of working together to use our combined limited resources to achieve strategic priority natural resource management outcomes.

Identification and implementation of funding mechanisms (i.e., Coral Reef Conservation Act reauthorization, National Fish and Wildlife Foundation MOUs, etc.) for responding to coral-related emergencies (e.g., disease outbreaks, storm damage, marine debris, etc.) is essential.

Updates:

- South Florida is currently experiencing an unprecedented outbreak of coral diseases leading to significant mortality of multiple coral species over 165 square miles of the Florida Reef Tract.
- Florida Reef Resilience Program partners have completed in water surveys documenting severe coral bleaching due to a second year of unusually warm water.
- Our Florida Reefs: River to Reefs waterways tour brought together community members and elected officials to highlight the importance of protecting healthy estuaries to ensure healthy coral reefs.

Guam

In Guam, water quality and rising ocean temperatures continue to pose huge management challenges for resource agencies managing coral communities. Guam experienced two consecutive bleaching events in 2013 and 2014, and may see another in 2015 depending on storm activity. Summer conditions pair prolonged exposure from extreme low tides with general ocean warming trends to create lethal conditions for susceptible species, such as staghorn Acropora. Remaining staghorn populations are limited to very shallow water on Guam's reef flats, having been decimated in deeper areas due to storms and repeated crown-of-thorns starfish outbreaks. A reef resilience assessment in 2016 will collect data at both shallow and deeper reef sites to generate an atlas of reef resilience that depicts the relative resilience of reef areas around the island. The atlas and related outputs generated by the assessment will be crucial to understanding the resilience of Guam's reefs in response to both local and global stressors.



Roxanna Miller, the new Coral Reef Monitoring Technician, finishes a coral quadrat survey while a monitoring assistant, Jacques Idechong, reels in the transect tape at a sampling station within the Tumon Bay monitoring site. Credit: Dave Burdick, Guam Long Term Monitoring Project

Updates:

- Comparing the Guam Long Term Monitoring program's data collected during the 2013 and 2014 bleaching events and more recent data will provide a revised baseline against which recovery can be compared.
- Collaboration between GovGuam agencies, NOAA, and the Nature Conservancy continues to support Manell-Geus watershed restoration projects such as tree plantings, biological surveys, and a socioeconomic survey of the Merizo community.
- The draft Guam Reef Resilience strategy, detailing Guam's response to specific coral reef threats and suggested implementation strategies, is scheduled to be completed by December 2015.

Hawai'i

During the current El Nino, Hawai'i experienced another summer of significant bleaching. Pocillopora spp. in the waters of Maui and Hawai'i have had the highest rate of bleaching. The state is also working toward establishing the first coral mitigation bank in the United States.



State of Hawaii, Division of Aquatic Resources' coral hatchery. Credit: Dave Gulko

Updates:

- Became the second state in the U.S. to establish a statewide environmental court, enabling specially trained judges at both the district and circuit court levels to provide informed, efficient, and consistent application of Hawaii's environmental laws.
- Demonstrated success in urchin hatchery and coral nursery operations for mitigation.
- Amended coral rules to recover damages caused by vessel groundings and pollution events.

Puerto Rico

In Puerto Rico, capacity has continued to be an issue. We are trying to find effective ways to help save time and funding and allow us to cover more space in a short period of time. We are working to ensure that future efforts consider recruiting more volunteers from the general public and university students and possibly integrating students from local public and private schools in different coral reef conservation actions. We would welcome Task Force member agency assistance in helping build this capacity.



Collector plastic bins utilized to transport *A. cervicornis* from nurseries areas to relocation place in Belvedere and Pta. Guaniquilla Natural Reserve, Cabo Rojo. May, 2014. Credit: E. Irizarr, DNER

Updates:

- Reduction and treatment of sediment laden runoff to coral restoration areas (i.e., Cabo Rojo, Culebra).
- Workshops on BMPs on erosion control to heavy machinery operators from municipalities of our coral reef priority areas (such as Guánica, Yauco, and Cabo Rojo).
- Coral restoration efforts in the Punta Guaniquilla and Punta Belvedere Natural Reserves, in our coral priority area of Cabo Rojo. Work was done with *Acropora palmata* and *A.cervicornis*, threatened coral species in PR and included volunteers and the Sunia Intern.

U.S. Virgin Islands

Since the last meeting, the USVI has been dealing with a large influx of Sargassum seaweed and an increase in the invasive *Halophila stipulacea*. The Sargassum influx has resulted in harmful impacts to people due to noxious odor when it decays and fish kills when trapped in embayments and other closed systems. The USVI is also concerned about the potential negative impacts to fisheries resources from the increase in the invasive *H. stipulacea*. Currently, *H. stipulacea* is treated as Essential Fish Habitat. The USVI requests the assistance of Task force member agencies in: 1) helping reduce the shoreline landings of sargassum, including deployment of temporary marine debris booms to divert the Sargassum from landing on the shoreline of more populated areas and 2) consideration (by NOAA) of *H. stipulacea* as an invasive species and help in its removal.



USVI Coral Reef Initiative Coordinator, Leslie Henderson, takes a selfie while participating in TCRMP. Credit: L. Henderson, DPNR

Updates:

- A strategic plan is being contracted to evaluate current enforcement capacity levels and recommendations for improvement, consistent with USVI Capacity Assessment.
- Increasing outreach on the value of coral reef ecosystems by creating a Visitor's Center at its St. Croix East End Marine Park location established in 2002 to protect and enhance coral reef ecosystem habitats and educate the public.
- The Green Cay Gut watershed project is moving forward in FY2016. The project is spearheaded by the NOAA Restoration Center with support from a number of federal, territorial, and private partners.

AIC AFFILIATE MEMBER UPDATES

Federated States of Micronesia



Post-Maysak assessment of grounded vessels. Credit: SPC

The Federated States of Micronesia (FSM) has been recovering from the devastating effects of Typhoon Maysak. From March 28 to April 1, 2015, Typhoon Maysak crossed directly over Chuuk State and increased in strength as it continued across Yap State. Chuuk State Governor Elimo and Yap State Governor Ganggiyan declared a State of Emergency on March 30 and April 1, respectively. FSM President Mori issued a Presidential emergency declaration for the nation in response to its two Western States and a combination of state, national and international human and financial resources were mobilized to meet urgent humanitarian and financial needs. President Obama signed a Presidential Disaster Declaration on April 28.

Updates:

- The landmark “Shark Bill” (2/26/15) covers the nearly 3 million square miles of EEZ and was a cooperative effort among FSM’s local communities, non-government partners, and local, state, and national governments, complementing the Micronesia Challenge campaign on shark conservation. Read the press release @ http://www.fsmpio.fm/RELEASES/2015/feb_15/02_06_15.html.
- In response to the FSM and U.S. Presidential Disaster Declarations, U.S. Federal and Pacific Regional and International Organizations assisted with the post-Typhoon Maysak recovery efforts.
- USDA agencies helped provide post-typhoon imagery of impacted islands/atolls to FSM counterparts and cooperated on agroforestry recovery and rehabilitation efforts with the local Agriculture and Forestry Agencies. Regional and International Organizations provided technical assistance on post-typhoon sectoral assessments and agro-forestry restoration.

Republic of the Marshall Islands

The Republic of the Marshall Islands is preparing for the up and coming El Niño. We are already feeling the effects as the normal winds (easterlies) for the last 2+ months have been westerlies. This has caused problems with the ships moored in the lagoon and has also caused severe erosion because of higher winds and greater intensity storms. We are expecting drought conditions starting in January and the Coastal Management Advisory Committee is working with the Majuro Local Government to set forth new temporary regulations regarding fishing closures, fishing techniques, fish sales, and fish sizes in order to protect herbivores. This is being done in anticipation of a bleaching event with the hope that if we protect the herbivores, the bleached coral will have a better chance of recovery.

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Updates:

- Protected Area Network (PAN) legislation introduced into legislature, public hearings held and legislation passed.
- “Homeowner’s Handbook to Prepare for Natural Hazards” published and is now being translated into Marshallese.
- Meeting with the Marshall Islands Mayors Association and several meetings with Majuro Local Government to discuss options temporary regulations in response to the expected bleaching event.



Meeting with Majuro Local Government and Coastal Management Advisory Council regarding El Niño bleaching and possible regulations. Credit: Broderick Menke

Republic of Palau



Symposium on environmental conservation in the Pacific region held at PICRC. Credit: PICRC

Updates:

- The development of the Protected Area Network (PAN) System-wide Management Plan is underway with collaboration from TNC. This will guide the coordination of PAN up to 2020 and is mandated to be developed in the PAN legal framework.
- APIC Japan hosted a symposium on environmental conservation in the Pacific region, creating best practices for sustainable management.
- Palau International Coral Reef Center (PICRC) received funding from the U.S. Department of the

Interior to study the impacts of two subsequent super-typhoons on Palau coral reefs and to quantify their recovery potential and offer adapted management strategies to policymakers.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

- A big thank you to Governor Padilla and the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico for hosting this meeting.
- To our Governors, Lt. Governors, and principals, thank you for your ongoing support of the AIC, local coral reef management, and national coral reef conservation.
- To Task Force co-chairs Sobeck and Faeth, thank you for your leadership of the Task Force. We look forward to continued communications and collaboration.
- To the Task Force member agencies, particularly NOAA, DOI, EPA, and NRCS, thank you for your continued support and partnership over the years. We look forward to continued collaboration and cooperation.
- Thank you to the Department of Natural and Environmental Resources, in particular Damaris Delgado, Tania Metz, and their team for all your hard work in planning, coordinating, and executing this meeting. You all did a great job.

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- To the Steering Committee co-chairs and Secretariat, Shannon Simpson, Liza Johnson, and Cheryl Fossani, thank you for your work in coordinating this meeting.
- To Shannon Simpson (NOAA), we wish the very best in your new position at the University of Colorado. Thank you for partnership and assistance over the past few years.
- Lastly, thank you to our Executive Director, Carey Morishige Martinez, and our three Advisors, Gerry Davis, Mike Hamnett, and Bob Richmond, for providing guidance to the AIC and helping ensure that the interests of the jurisdictions are recognized.

AIC Points of Contact and Secretariat

Points of Contact

Ms. Fran Castro, Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands, AIC Chair
Mr. Jean-Pierre Oriol, Territory of the U.S. Virgin Islands, AIC Vice Chair
Dr. Ruth Matagi-Tofiga, Territory of American Samoa
Mr. William Castro, Territory of Guam
Ms. Joanna Walczak, State of Florida
Mr. Ray Uchimura, State of Hawai'i (interim POC)
Ms. Damaris Delgado Lopez, Commonwealth of Puerto Rico

Affiliate Members

Mr. Don Hess, Republic of the Marshall Islands
Ms. Alissa Takesy, Federated States of Micronesia
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Mr. Gerry Davis, AIC Resource Advisor
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