October 7, 2009

The Honorable Anthony M. Babauta
Assistant Secretary for Insular Areas
U.S. Department of the Interior
1849 C Street, N.W.
Washington, DC 20240

Dear Assistant Secretary Babauta:

In 1986, Congress enacted the Compact of Free Association (P.L. 90-239) which states, in Section 101(i), "Because Rongelap was directly affected by fallout from the 1954 United States thermonuclear test and because the Rongelap people remain unconvinced that it is safe to continue to live on Rongelap Island. It is the intent of Congress to take such steps (if any) as may be necessary to overcome the effects of such fallout on the habitability of Rongelap Island, and to restore Rongelap Island, if necessary, so that it can be safely inhabited." To further this intent, and in addition to existing related programs (Section 177 healthcare, DOE radiological monitoring, and USDA supplemental food), in 1999, the U.S. reached agreement with the Rongelap Atoll Local Government to provide $45 million to the Resettlement Trust Fund ("Trust Fund").

For over five years, the program made impressive progress, concluding radiological rehabilitation and completing reconstruction of the airport, dock, roads, power and water systems, many community buildings and a portion of the houses needed for the returning population. Unfortunately, in recent years progress toward fulfilling the mutual commitment of the U.S. and Rongelap to resettlement has stalled.

We are writing to express our concerns with this recent lack of progress and with management of the Trust Fund. First, we are concerned that, while Rongelap is nearly ready for resettlement, construction on final projects is not underway and there are no specific plans to begin resettling families to the island and closing down the temporary community on Mitiatoo, where many now live. Second, we are concerned that an increasing portion of Trust Fund resources that were intended for resettlement projects on Rongelap, are instead being used for operational expenses elsewhere and to maintain the as-yet uninhabited community on Rongelap. Finally, we object to the use of Trust Fund resources for rental payments, or "tribute" to landowners on Rongelap. The Rongelap local government was notified by letter from then-Deputy Assistant Secretary for Insular Affairs, David Cohen, dated May 24, 2007, that such payments would no longer be permitted from the Trust Fund. We support that decision.

Returning the people of Rongelap to their homeland remains a solemn commitment of the United States. Rongelap and its neighboring atolls have been recognized internationally as an area of extraordinary beauty and unique marine resources. The future of the people lies in returning to the land and waters where they have lived and taken strength for centuries.
To restore and reinvigorate the commitment and progress toward resettlement, we request that the FY2010 Rongelap resettlement budget request be approved for no more than 4 months, and that its approval be conditioned on the local government's cooperation with your Office in reporting to Congress within 90 days on the future of the program. This report shall include background on Trust Fund and local government budget activity since 2000, including copies of relevant agreements and amendments, and a draft Supplemental FY2010 budget that is consistent with existing agreements and which sets forth specific tasks and dates for the commencement of resettlement, the completion of final projects, and the closing down of the facilities at Majettu. Of course, any tasks or activities that Rongelap is willing to undertake to advance resettlement during the period of the 4-month budget, such as resettling the families of the maintenance workers currently residing on Rongelap, or starting construction of final facilities and additional housing, should be encouraged and accommodated.

Our staffs are available to work with you and representatives of Rongelap to follow-up on these requests. Thank you for your continuing commitment and support of our shared goal of returning the people of Rongelap to their homeland.

Sincerely,

Nick Rahall
Chairman, Natural Resources Committee

Rep. Nick Rahall
Chairman, Natural Resources Committee

Ranking Member, Natural Resources Committee

Sen. Mark H. Begich
Chairman, Energy and Natural Resources Committee

Sen. Lisa Murkowski
Ranking Member, Energy and Natural Resources Committee

Sen. Daniel K. Akaka
U.S. Senator

Hawaii

Rep. Madeleine Bordallo
Chairwoman, Subcommittee on Insular Affairs, Oceans, & Wildlife

Chairwoman, Subcommittee on Insular Affairs, Oceans, & Wildlife

Sen. Daniel K. Akaka
U.S. Senator

Hawaii

cc: The Honorable James Malapyoshi, Mayor of Rongelap.
    The Honorable Kenneth Keli, Senator, Rongelap Atoll.
    The Honorable, Benny Debrum, Marshall Islands Ambassador to the United States
    Director Aly Freihek, Office of Australia, New Zealand, and the Pacific Islands,
    U.S. Department of State.