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United States
Department of
Agriculture

Food and
Nutrition
Service

3101 Park
Center Drive

Alexandria, VA
22302-1500

The Honorable Gregorio Kilili Camacho Sablan
U.S. House of Representatives
423 Cannon House Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Congressman Sablan:

Thank you for your May 2, 2012, letter regarding your concerns about an announcement of new reductions in benefits instituted by the Commonwealth of the Northern Marianas Island (CNMI) Government.

FNS remains committed to meeting the nutrition needs of the people of the CNMI and to working collaboratively with the CNMI Government to strengthen Nutrition Assistance Program (NAP) operations through ongoing technical assistance.

We appreciate your concern about the recent reduction in NAP benefits. As you know, CNMI has been provided budgetary relief on two separate occasions over the last 3 years. First, in fiscal year (FY) 2009, CNMI was provided a 13.6 percent increase in funding to match the increases provided under the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) to other jurisdictions, including Puerto Rico and American Samoa. This ARRA related funding level increase for CNMI continues until the expiration of ARRA funds, effective October 1, 2013.

Additionally, in FY 2012, CNMI was allotted a one-time funding increase of \$1 million. This funding was in response to the CNMI's projected shortfall and its actions of reducing benefit issuance to an average benefit level of approximately \$200 per household per month, and to eliminate CNMI's backlog of unserved, eligible citizens.

For FY 2012, the CNMI NAP budget was approved with an average benefit level of \$242 per household, an increase of approximately \$42, based on the number of participating households in June 2011. However, CNMI recently advised FNS that it was again experiencing a budget shortfall and would need to reduce benefits and/or begin wait listing eligible citizens. It was at this time that FNS became aware that instead of issuing benefits at the \$242 level approved in the FY 2012 budget, CNMI had been issuing benefits at a higher average level of approximately \$273. Additionally, the average monthly caseload increased slightly from 3,609 households in FY 2011 to 3,649 households in FY 2012.

As you may know, FNS discussed the changes to the benefit levels with your Legislative Assistant, Ed Manglona, via conference call on May 11, 2012. During this call, FNS discussed how benefits are calculated and the definition of a household under the NAP.

The Honorable Gregorio Kilili Camacho Sablan
Page 2

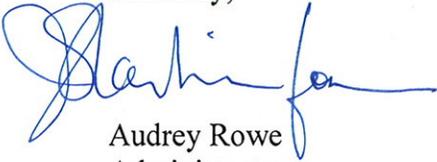
We also answered questions related to how NAP benefits and maximum benefit levels are determined, and what average benefit means.

FNS Western Regional Office (WRO) staff worked with NAP leadership to resolve the projected FY 2012 budget shortfall. Through these conversations, it was determined that CNMI can remain within budget and serve the eligible households, with an average benefit level of \$242, as originally agreed and approved. This level maximizes the benefits of NAP within the current available funding and allows CNMI to serve all eligible NAP recipients.

FNS shares your commitment to meet the nutrition needs of CNMI's population. WRO will continue to provide technical assistance and work with NAP leadership to maximize funding and provide a stable benefit to NAP households by developing a plan to more accurately project changes in NAP participation that would impact the amount of the block grant each year. Toward this end, CNMI must make appropriate programmatic decisions to remain within the amount of available funding under the block grant.

Again, thank you for your letter and your concern for the people of CNMI. Please have your staff contact Scott A. Carter, Director, Office of Governmental Affairs, at (703) 305-2313, if you have any additional questions.

Sincerely,



Audrey Rowe
Administrator