

Statement
The Honorable Gregorio Kilili Camacho Sablan
Member, House Committee on Agriculture
Business Meeting
April 18, 2012

Good morning and thank you, Chairman Lucas and Ranking Member Peterson, for the opportunity to submit a statement regarding the Agricultural Reconciliation Act of 2012.

My first impression of this proposal is dismay. This Committee has already had to sacrifice so much for important agricultural programs. Now, we are confronted with a proposal to cut another \$33.7 billion. This time from the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, which not only supports those who produce food, but also has done so much to reduce hunger and food insecurity throughout our country. To cut SNAP now, while families in this country are still struggling out of the worst economic situation since the Great Depression, betrays a lack of understanding of how this program is designed to respond to economic conditions. SNAP is supposed to grow when times are tough. It provides a safety net. And as conditions improve, which they are now doing, the demand for food assistance will recede and the cost of SNAP will naturally be reduced. But to cut the program arbitrarily, without reference to its purpose or to the continuing need, makes no sense.

Unfortunately, the people I represent do not have access to SNAP. The Northern Marianas receives a block grant that is supposed to be the equivalent of SNAP, but in fact only provides half the assistance that SNAP would. Ironically, even with the cuts that are now being proposed in overall SNAP funding, people who need food aid in the Marianas would still be better off under SNAP than under the current block grant system. That's how big a disparity we are looking at

between the help Americans in my district receive and that received by Americans protected by SNAP.

Since I was first elected to Congress in 2009, I have been working to improve this situation for people in the Northern Marianas. I was able to lobby the Department of Agriculture to increase the Northern Marianas block grant by 13.6%, the same increase that the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act gave SNAP. I was able to get another \$1 million added administratively to the FY12 block grant. This piecemeal approach is not sustainable, however, nor does it provide an equivalent level of food assistance to my constituents. In fact, the block grant system has demonstrated its inherent weakness by forcing the local government, which administers the program, to cut benefits and wait-list applicants, as more people have become eligible.

For this reason I introduced legislation, H.R. 1465, the AYUDA Act, which includes the Northern Marianas in SNAP. This will give people in the Northern Marianas the same level of benefits provided to other Americans. Just as importantly, including the Northern Marianas in SNAP will bring the benefits of a dynamic program that responds to changing economic circumstances and changing demand for assistance – increasing expenditures in hard times, but also lowering spending when the economy improves.

Bringing the Northern Marianas under the administrative umbrella of the national program will also improve management. All of us on this Committee are concerned about squeezing every bit of value out of the money that we authorize for SNAP. We cannot tolerate waste, fraud, or abuse. Yet when the Northern Marianas Governor met Department of Agriculture officials here in Washington in February, he reported to them there is fraud occurring in the Marianas. Chairwoman Jean Schmidt, Ranking Member Joe Baca, myself, and others on the Nutrition and Horticulture Subcommittee have formally requested that the

Department investigate, but we have received no response. We have also received reports that the block grant program has been administered in the Northern Marianas in a manner that is in violation of the Department's civil rights policies. The only response I have received from the Department on this is that the local operations manual will be rewritten to say that such violations are prohibited, which checks the bureaucratic box, but does nothing to make whole those who did not receive the food assistance they were entitled to.

What is even more frustrating to me about this situation is that Secretary of Agriculture already has the statutory authority to extend SNAP to the Northern Mariana Islands. He could give my constituents the same assistance other Americans receive, if he chose to do so. He could exercise greater management control to ensure that the reports of fraud and civil rights violations are addressed effectively. He has not. Last summer in an open hearing of the Nutrition Subcommittee, Department officials promised "we will work with you" on my goal to bring the Northern Marianas into SNAP. The Department did provide an additional \$1 million for the block grant, as I mentioned. Beyond that I received one phone call in February saying that the Department needed "data" and a follow up letter a few weeks ago listing exactly what that data was. It includes such information as the medical expenses, not covered by insurance or "someone else," that are more than \$35 per month for elderly or disabled members of each household in the Northern Mariana Islands. I will let the feasibility of that request speak for itself.

Against that backdrop and the knowledge that weighs on me each and every day that hundreds of families I represent have to choose whether to pay their utility bills so their kids have light to do their homework, or fill their cars with expensive gasoline to get to work, or put sufficient and nutritionally adequate food on their tables, I now see this Committee proposing to put more Americans in exactly this

same predicament by cutting funding for SNAP. This should not be. SNAP has proven its value. It has long-standing bipartisan support because it is a program that works: responsive in times of need, helping the most vulnerable, and lifting people out of poverty. Yes, we need to find ways to reduce our government deficit, but SNAP expenditures will decline in the years ahead as the economy continues its recovery. In the meantime, we need to continue helping those Americans who need our help.

Thank you for this opportunity.