



Arnold I. Palacios
Governor

David M. Apatang
Lieutenant Governor

COMMONWEALTH OF THE NORTHERN MARIANA ISLANDS
OFFICE OF THE GOVERNOR

Executive Order 2025-001

By the Governor of the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands

**TO ESTABLISH CORAL REEFS AS CRITICAL NATURAL INFRASTRUCTURE IN THE
COMMONWEALTH OF THE NORTHERN MARIANA ISLANDS**

WHEREAS, pursuant to 1 CMC §2653, the Department of Lands and Natural Resources is responsible for the protection and enhancement of the natural resources of the islands, including the marine environment; to protect wildlife resources including fish, game, and endangered species; to maintain and provide for the conservation of agricultural and aquatic resources; and

WHEREAS, pursuant to Executive Order No. 2013-24, the Bureau of Environmental and Coastal Quality (BECQ) was established to protect and enhance the CNMI's coastal resources for residents and visitors through effective and adaptive resource management, interagency collaboration, and stakeholder engagement, in a manner that builds and sustains community resilience and well-being; and

WHEREAS, healthy coral reefs are among the most biologically diverse, culturally important, economically valuable ecosystems on Earth and the health of coral reefs is constantly degrading and compromised due to natural and anthropogenic stressors from land-based sources of pollution, development, unsustainable fishing practices, and the introduction of invasive species; and

WHEREAS, the Commonwealth faces increasing climate-related risks, disturbances and disaster events, including exposure to catastrophic storms, unprecedented sea level rise, higher sea surface temperatures, ocean acidification, unforeseen vessel incidents, and experts predict an increase in the number and severity of typhoons, higher levels of rainfall, outbreaks of Crown-of-Thorns seastars, and increasing frequency of coral bleaching events which will negatively impact natural infrastructure; and

WHEREAS, the health and sustainability of the Commonwealth's communities and economy are closely intertwined with the health of our natural infrastructure. Further, many local, Indigenous, and coastal communities have long maintained strong biocultural, spiritual, ecological, economical, and social connections to natural infrastructures critical to preserving cultures and cultural stewardship practices, most especially pertaining to coral reefs; and

WHEREAS, natural infrastructure-lined communities with small size, low elevation, remote geographical location, and concentration of infrastructure along coastlines have underserved populations that are denser, growing faster, and composed of more people from lower-middle

income groups than the global average, and are especially vulnerable to climate change impacts; and

WHEREAS, according to a 2018 study funded by the NOAA Office for Coastal Management, CNMI's ocean economy employed up to 8,300 people annually, roughly forty to fifty percent of our local employment, contributing millions towards the CNMI's annual gross domestic product; and

WHEREAS, in the United States, the estimated economic value of healthy coral reefs is \$3.42 billion annually, not including shoreline protection and hazard reduction values, and the value of U.S. coral reefs for flood protection has been quantitatively assessed at greater than \$1.8 billion dollars annually for the direct benefits of avoided flood damages to property. The value of the coastal protection services provided by reefs can be retained or enhanced through active coral restoration, a nature-based solution that seeks to meet conservation and hazard mitigation management goals; and

WHEREAS, according to a 2019 CNMI Ecosystem Services valuation study, coral reefs and seagrass habitats in CNMI generate \$114.8 Million annually, protecting 47,329 people (2020 Census), and critical coastal infrastructure. The Commonwealth recognizes that environmental resources such as coral reefs, if healthy, effectively managed, and functioning, can serve as critical natural infrastructure mitigating the risks and related loss and damage from the effects of climate change and natural disasters, protecting coastal properties by reducing wave energy, trapping sediments, and attenuating storm surge. These services make it essential to protect coral reefs from hazards and respond efficiently when incidents do occur; and

WHEREAS, pursuant to Executive Directive 235, the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands' Coral Reef Initiative Program was established as an interagency structure (between the Division of Coastal Resources Management, the Division of Environmental Quality and DLNR's Division of Fish and Wildlife) to coordinate issues with regards to coral reefs; and

WHEREAS, in 2018, the CNMI recognized the importance of protection and enforcement of damages caused to coral reefs, by enacting Public Law 20-79 (the "Coral Reef Protection Act") which designated DLNR as the enforcement authority for the law, and created a Coral Restoration Fund in order to distribute funds for the purposes of restoration; and

WHEREAS, in addition to the aforementioned executive order and public laws, the Commonwealth currently has a list of Marine Protected Areas protecting coral reefs, such as the Lighthouse Reef Trochus Sanctuary (CNMI Admin. Code § 85-30.1-415); Managaha Marine Conservation Area (CNMI Public Law 12-12); Bird Island and Forbidden Island Marine Sanctuaries (CNMI Public Law 12-46); the Rota Sasanhaya Bay Fish Reserve (Rota Local Law

9-2); and soon-to-be re-established Tinian Marine Reserve (CNMI Public Law 15-90 and CNMI Public Law 17-14); and

WHEREAS, the Commonwealth recognizes these benefits and importance, and is justly proud of the efforts we have exerted in order to preserve the coral reefs of our islands; and

WHEREAS, recognition of coral reefs as critical natural infrastructure demonstrates political support for nature-based solutions to improve and restore the health of our coral reefs and ocean ecosystems; and

WHEREAS, this designation makes it easier to direct funding, particularly infrastructure, hazard mitigation, and disaster recovery monies, to coral reef conservation and restoration; and

NOW THEREFORE, I, ARNOLD I. PALACIOS, by virtue of the authority vested in me by the Constitution and laws of the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands, and in order to achieve effective and efficient protection of our coral reefs so as to serve the interests of the Commonwealth and its people, hereby direct the following:

- (1) The Government of the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands acknowledges the critical and diverse values of and threats to coral reef ecosystems in the Commonwealth and declares coral reefs as critical natural infrastructure.
- (2) The Government of the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands, including its agencies, bureaus, departments, and other instrumentalities shall coordinate to seek increased funding from federal agencies to protect, conserve and restore the Commonwealth's critical natural infrastructure of coral reefs to the extent possible, especially before and after disasters.
- (3) The Government of the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands, including the CNMI Department of Lands and Natural Resources, Bureau of Environmental and Coastal Quality, and other relevant government agencies, bureaus, departments, and instrumentalities are to take action to protect, maintain, conserve, enhance and restore the natural infrastructure of coral reefs in the Commonwealth, including by taking administrative, enforcement, conservation, restoration and enhancement actions; and shall incorporate this directive and any other forthcoming natural infrastructure laws about coral reefs into policies and procedures, as well as rules and regulations wherever applicable.

SIGNED AND PROMULGATED on this 14th day of November, 2024


Arnold I. Palacios
Governor

Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands