

**Statement of
Carmen G. Cantor
Nominee for
Assistant Secretary for Insular and International Affairs,
United States Department of the Interior
Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee
April 28, 2022**

Thank you very much Chairman Manchin, Ranking Member Barrasso, and distinguished Members of the Committee. I am honored to appear before you today as the President's nominee to be the next Assistant Secretary for Insular and International Affairs at the Department of the Interior. I am grateful for the confidence that President Biden and Secretary of the Interior Haaland have placed in me with this nomination.

If confirmed, I pledge to do my utmost to uphold this trust and to advance our nation's interests in the U.S. territories and the vital Indo-Pacific region.

I grew up and attended public schools in Puerto Rico, a U.S. territory in the Caribbean. For over three decades, I have been privileged to serve our nation in different roles and agencies including at the U.S. Embassy in the Federated States of Micronesia (FSM), the U.S. Postal Service, the Federal Maritime Commission, the Foreign Agricultural Service, and the U.S. Department of State. Any measure of success I achieved during these appointments would not have been possible without the support of my family, so I would like to start by expressing my deepest gratitude to them.

My father, Anibal Castro Justiniano, an Army National Guard veteran, is one of 18 siblings. My mother, Zoraida Laracuate Ramirez, was one of 9 siblings. Regrettably, she passed away two years ago, right at the beginning of the pandemic. I have one sister, Zoraida, and many uncles, aunts and cousins. I won't name them all, but I do want to recognize my husband, Carlos, a retired federal public servant, and our daughters who are here with me today. Amanda is a Communications Coordinator at the American Junior Golf Association and Adriana is a junior in high school. Ashley, a public servant working at NASA in Cleveland, is in Puerto Rico watching this hearing with my father and sister.

Over the last two and a half years, I've had the distinct honor to serve our country as U.S. Ambassador to the FSM, a country of 607 islands. I was honored to be nominated by the previous administration and confirmed by the Senate to my current position. In addition to being a committed career public servant, because I grew up on an island, I can connect with and understand the challenges and issues islanders face, particularly in the U.S. territories.

The Office of the Assistant Secretary for Insular and International Affairs carries out the Secretary of the Interior's responsibilities for the U.S. territories; administers and oversees federal assistance under the Compact of Free Association (COFA) to our distinct and sincere friends and partners of the Freely Associated States; and leads the Ocean, Great Lakes and Coastal Program, helping to coordinate ocean and coastal programs across the Department's bureaus.

If confirmed as Assistant Secretary, I will support our relationship with the territories -- hardworking and patriotic Americans who are not always at the forefront of attention in Washington. I will work with these communities closely to ensure they can thrive.

I place a high priority on the Indo-Pacific region and our enduring relationship with the strongholds of freedom in the region, the Freely Associated States. These sovereign countries share our vision for an open and free region that respects sovereignty, the rule of law, and transparency. If confirmed, I will work to strengthen our relationship with the Freely Associated States by continuing to support their peace, security, prosperity, democracy, and freedoms.

I also commit to working closely with the Special Presidential Envoy on Compact Negotiations to prioritize and expedite dialogue on the expiring COFA provisions and advance our mutually beneficial partnership.

Having lived in Puerto Rico and the FSM, I understand island nations face unique challenges. If confirmed, I will work with agency partners and the Insular communities and their leaders to identify their priority needs, support them when it comes to climate resilience projects, and assist with their economic recovery.

Given my decades of experience in an interagency environment, if confirmed, I will use my skills to continue to foster collaboration and ensure all federal agencies with a role are working effectively together in these strategically important regions.

In closing, I can imagine no greater honor than to serve as the Assistant Secretary for Insular and International Affairs at the Department of the Interior, working with our friends in the territories and in the Freely Associated States during this critical time.

Chairman Manchin, Ranking Member Barrasso, if confirmed, I look forward to working with you and the honorable Members of this Committee to advance U.S. interests in the Insular areas and to sustain and expand the progress we have achieved in our unique, long-term, and positive relationship with our tremendously important partners, allies and special friends, the Freely Associated States.

Again, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today. I would be pleased to answer any questions you may have.