



News from

# United States Senator Daniel K. Akaka

## Akaka Sponsored Land Bills Enacted

The Omnibus Public Land Management Act is the most significant conservation legislation passed by Congress in 15 years. In addition to enlarging several park boundaries, it designates over two million acres as wilderness, three areas as national parks, one site as a national monument, three sites as conservation areas, over 1,000 miles as wild and scenic rivers, and over 2,800 miles as national trails.

This legislation contains four bills, which I sponsored in the 110th Congress, which will benefit Hawaii and the nation.

- The Kalaupapa Memorial Act establishes a memorial honoring the Hansen's disease patients of Kalaupapa and Kalawao within the Kalaupapa National Historical Park. This measure authorizes a non-profit organization consisting of Kalaupapa residents and their family and friends to establish a memorial at a suitable location in the park to honor the memory of the 8,000 residents who lived at the Kalaupapa and Kalawao communities.
- The Na Hoa Pili O Kaloko-Honokohau Advisory Commission Reauthorization Act re-authorizes the Advisory Commission for Kaloko-Honokohau National Historical Park through 2018. Kaloko-Honokohau National Historical Park, located on the Western coast of the Big Island, was established in 1978 to pro-



*Koloa, Kauai, April 2009—Senator Akaka visits the National Tropical Botanical Garden with Director Chipper Wichman. Akaka's bill authorizing \$5 million for the institution to continue its important work in biological and medical research became law earlier this year.*

vide for the preservation, interpretation, and perpetuation of the area's cultural and natural features.

- The Outdoor Recreation Act of 1963 Amendments Act authorizes \$5 million over the course of ten years to the National Tropical Botanical Garden (NTBG) for operation and maintenance. Since 1976, NTBG has worked to preserve and cultivate indigenous plants and has conducted important scientific research, education programs, and habitat restoration related to tropical flora.
- The Paleontological Resource Preservation Act provides for the protection of fossil resources on federal lands and curbs fossil theft, while continuing to allow the practice of casual collecting enjoyed on federal lands.

It was an honor to join President Obama in the White House as he signed the Omnibus Public Land Management Act (P.L. 111-11) into law on March 30th.

## Legislation Will Improve Veterans Benefits and Service

Today the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) runs the nation's largest health care system, one of the largest life insurance programs in the world, and provides compensation and benefits to millions of disabled veterans across the nation. While VA does some things very well, it must adapt to the changing needs of veterans and their families. As chairman of the Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs, I am pushing for these changes, through oversight, by working with Secretary Shinseki, and through legislation.

Earlier this year, the Veterans' Affairs Committee unanimously approved a package of bills to improve veterans' health care and benefits. With the Committee's bipartisan backing, I am working to get these bills through Congress and to the desk of President Obama, who was a member of our Committee less than a year ago. These bills will improve VA services for veterans in Hawaii and the nation. They include:

- The Veterans Health Care Budget Reform and Transparency Act would fund veterans' health care one-year ahead of the regular appropriations process. In 19 of the past 22 years, VA has not been funded on time, and the Department has had to ration care to



*Washington, D.C., March 2008—Senator Akaka greets members of the Veterans of Foreign Wars during joint House and Senate hearings with Veterans Service Organizations. These annual hearings provide valuable information for Congressional lawmakers.*

veterans who require its services. With this change, VA can plan out its health care operations, enabling it to serve veterans more effectively and use taxpayer dollars more efficiently. More than half of the Senate has cosponsored this bill.

- The Caregiver and Veterans Health Services Act would bridge two existing gaps in VA services: support for family caregivers, and care for rural veterans. VA would establish a program for family caregivers providing training and needed resources. This bill would also break down barriers between rural veterans and the health care they earned. Its provisions include authority for VA to reimburse veterans for air travel from remote locations. This is of special interest to Hawaii because we cannot drive across our state, or to other states.
- The Veterans' Benefits Enhancement Act would strengthen insurance programs for disabled veterans, and expand eligibility for traumatic injury protection. It would also ease a veteran's burden of proving his disabilities are service-related and improve employee protections for veterans and today's military men and women.
- Veterans Health Care Authorization Act would strengthen recruitment and retention of VA medical professionals, establish pilot programs to try new approaches to veterans' care, and help VA adapt to the growing number of women in military service.

Together, these bills will help VA adapt to the needs of today's veterans and their family members and leave the Department in a better position to prepare for tomorrow.

## **VA Leaders Have Strong Hawaii Ties**

President Obama nominated two from Hawaii to transform VA: Kauai-born General Eric K. Shinseki, to be Secretary of the Department of Veterans Affairs, and McKinley High School graduate Tammy Duckworth, to be Assistant Secretary for Public and Intergovernmental Affairs. More recently, Obama nominated Honolulu's

Ray Jefferson to be the Department of Labor's Assistant Secretary for Veterans Employment and Training Services. As Chairman of the Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs, I chair the hearings to review President Obama's nominees to lead VA.

Secretary Shinseki and Assistant Secretary Duckworth were both approved unanimously by the Veterans' Affairs Committee, and the full Senate. Their hearings were both proud moments for Hawaii, and they are representing us well in their positions as VA leaders. Mr. Jefferson's confirmation hearing was held on July 22, and I look forward to working closely with him.

We are fortunate that our relatively small state has such a strong presence among those serving America's veterans, a list which should include kama'aina President Obama, the first Commander-in-Chief to have served on the Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs.



*Washington, D.C., December 2008—Senator Akaka meets with newly designated Veterans Affairs Secretary Eric K. Shinseki. Shinseki, a Kauai native, was confirmed by the Senate in January 2009.*

## **Akaka Provisions Added to CARD Act**

The Credit Card Accountability Responsibility and Disclosure (CARD) Act of 2009 strengthens protections for consumers in the credit card industry. On May 22, President Obama signed the CARD Act into law.

During Senate deliberations on the CARD Act, I added a number of provisions aimed at protecting consumers in debt. These provisions, which I originally introduced as the Credit Card Minimum Payment Warning Act, require credit card companies to provide information necessary to make informed decisions regarding debt and payment.

Many do not realize that paying just the minimum amount required on a credit card bill will lead to hefty interest over time. My bill required companies to disclose the amount of interest that would be paid if consumers only made the minimum required payment each month and the required payment necessary if they want to get out of debt within a year and a half.

As more working families struggle to make ends meet, it

is extremely troubling that there are unscrupulous credit counselors ready to exploit them. Under the CARD Act, credit card statements will include a simple toll free number that will direct people to reputable credit counselors. As a member of the Senate Committee on Banking, Housing, and Urban Affairs, I am proud to have participated in crafting legislation to protect American consumers and provide them with the information they need to pay off their credit card bills in the most effective manner possible.

### **“Akaka Bill” Update**

On June 11, 2009, the House Natural Resources Committee held a successful legislative hearing. The Senate Indian Affairs Committee held a hearing on August 6, 2009. Efforts to advance the bill through Committee will be pursued in both the House and Senate. Our delegation remains committed to enacting this legislation of great importance to the people of Hawaii.

The Native Hawaiian Government Reorganization Act (S. 1011/H.R. 2314) provides a structured process to reorganize a Native Hawaiian governing entity to exercise self-governance and self-determination. Once federally recognized, the Native Hawaiian governing entity can enter into discussions with the State of Hawaii and United States. Any agreements reached by the three parties will require implementing legislation at the state and federal level. The United States has committed itself to a process of reconciliation with Native Hawaiians and this bill allows us to take the next step in continuing this process.

### **Akaka Legislation Seeks Equity for Hawaii’s Federal Employees**

Federal employees in Hawaii, along with those in Alaska and the territories, have long been disadvantaged in their retirement. They receive a Cost of Living Allowance (COLA) to adjust their salaries for the high cost of living in Hawaii, which is not taxed. However, the COLA amount does not count toward retirement. Employees in the contiguous 48 states instead receive locality pay, which is taxed and does count for retirement.

To remedy this inequity, in 2008, I introduced a bill to transition Hawaii, Alaska, and the territories to locality pay. It passed the Senate, but Congress adjourned before it could pass the House of Representatives. In March 2009, I reintroduced the bill as S. 507, Non-Foreign Area Retirement Equity Assurance (AREA) Act of 2009, with Senators Inouye, Murkowski (R-Alaska), and Begich (D-Alaska).

S. 507 would phase in locality pay over three years. In order to protect federal employees’ income, since locality pay is taxed, COLA will be reduced only 65 cents for every dollar of locality pay. That means federal employees will continue to receive some COLA for some time after locality pay is fully phased in.

I am working to ensure that the Non-Foreign AREA Act is enacted this year. In Congress, it often is easier to pass

legislation if you can attach it to a larger bill, or “vehicle.” I am looking for every opportunity to do that.

Recently, the House of Representatives included S. 507’s provisions in two different bills and passed them. S. 507 passed the House as part of both H.R. 2990, the Disabled Military Retiree Relief Act, and H.R. 2647, the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2010, on June 24 and June 25, 2009, respectively. Much work must still be done before this proposal becomes law, but we have made important steps toward making that happen.

### **PASS ID Will Protect Privacy, Save States Money**

On June 15, 2009, I introduced S. 1261, the Providing for Additional Security in States’ Identification Act of 2009 (PASS ID Act), which will save money and protect privacy while fulfilling the recommendation of the 9/11 Commission to increase the security of State driver’s licenses. The Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee held a hearing on my bill on July 15, 2009, and on July 29, 2009, the Committee unanimously voted to report the bill to the full Senate for passage.

States like Hawaii are facing serious budget shortfalls and simply cannot afford REAL ID which calls for all states to store copies of individuals’ documents such as birth certificates and their photographs in databases and to provide all other state Departments of Motor Vehicles with access to that information. REAL ID does not require any privacy protection of these state databases, which could provide one-stop shopping for identity thieves and the backbone for a national ID card.

Due to these concerns, I worked with my Senate colleagues, the Department of Homeland Security, privacy and civil liberties groups, and the National Governors Association and National Council of State Legislators to develop the PASS ID Act, which will save states considerable money and address the most troubling aspects of REAL ID.

Perhaps the most important improvement in the PASS ID Act is the removal of the REAL ID mandate that states share their driver’s license data with other states. The PASS ID Act will allow states to continue to maintain their own databases with more stringent privacy and security requirements.

For the first time, PASS ID requires states to protect data that is transmitted or is stored on identification cards or licenses. Currently, personal information may be collected and tracked with purchases or sold to third parties. PASS ID also provides secure identification for air travel, but ensures that our constitutional rights are protected.

This bill does not address all of my concerns with REAL ID but it does represent a practical alternative. Unless we act, in less than a year states will be required to comply with a law that is overly burdensome and unworkable. I will continue to work closely with



the Department of Homeland Security to ensure that privacy rights are protected fully during the implementation of PASS ID.

It is my hope that the Congress can quickly act on this bill before the end of this year to ensure states can begin to implement a more workable solution to secure identification.

## Recognition for Filipino World War II Veterans Achieved

In February, Congress acknowledged the contributions and sacrifices of Filipinos who were called into the service of the United States Armed Forces in World War II when it authorized benefits to these war veterans as



*Washington, D.C., June 2009—Senator Akaka visits with Filipino veterans, who will receive a one-time payment under the ARRA for service during World War II.*

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Please visit my newly redesigned Senate website where you can get updates on my work and share your opinion on issues. You can sign up to get important email alerts from my office, or send me an email on a topic that interests you. I also welcome regular mail, although Senate security delays deliver of letters by up to a month. Whatever method you choose, I look forward to hearing from you.

*Fanny*

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part of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 (ARRA). On February 17, 2009, President Obama signed the ARRA into law.

It is recognition that I have long supported and was long overdue. In 1941, the Philippines was a commonwealth of the United States and President Franklin D. Roosevelt ordered Filipinos into the U.S. military. After the war, Congress passed the Rescissions Act of 1946, stripping Filipino veterans of benefits they earned serving in WWII.

In April 2008, I included a provision to restore veterans status to the remaining Filipino WWII veterans as part of an omnibus veterans benefits bill. Unfortunately, the provision was stripped after consideration in the House. Thus, I was very pleased earlier this year when Senator Inouye was able to include provisions authorizing the payment of benefits to the surviving Filipino World War II veterans in the ARRA. The ARRA authorized a one-time payment to Filipino WWII veterans in the amount of \$15,000, for U.S. citizens, and \$9,000, for non-citizens.

But my work on behalf of Filipino veterans is not done. I recently introduced S. 1337, the Filipino Veterans Family Reunification Act of 2009, which would expedite the reunification of Filipino veterans who are U.S. citizens with their children who have languished on the visa waiting lists for years. My bill would amend the Immigration and Nationality Act to exempt the children of these veterans from the numerical limitation on immigrant visas.

## Veterans' Committee Hearings Coming to Hawaii

I am pleased to announce that the Committee on Veterans' Affairs has scheduled field hearings in Hawaii in August. While the times and locations are still being decided, the Committee expects to hold at least two hearings, one on Oahu, and another on Maui. When the schedule is final, I will post it on my website. As Chairman of the Committee, I will be holding each of these hearings myself.

Here are the tentative dates and times:

### VA and DOD Outreach to Returning Guard and Reserves

Tuesday, August 25, 10 a.m.  
Oahu Veterans Center,  
1298 Kukila Street, Honolulu, Hawaii

### The State of VA Services on Maui

Friday, August 28, 10 a.m.  
Maui Arts & Cultural Center  
One Cameron Way, Kahului