

Native Hawaiian & Pacific Islander



**HAWAI'I
COVID-19**

Response Recovery Resilience

TEAM

August 11, 2020

Admiral John Aquilino
Commander, U.S. Pacific Fleet
250 Makalapa Drive
Pearl Harbor, Hawai'i 96860
john.aquilino@navy.mil

Vice Admiral Scott D. Conn
Commander, U.S. Third Fleet
53690 Tomahawk Drive
Suite 338
San Diego, California 92147
scott.conn@navy.mil

Re: Questions and Concerns Regarding Rim of the Pacific Maritime Exercises in August 2020

Aloha mai e Admiral John Aquilino and Vice Admiral Scott D. Conn,

The Native Hawaiian Pacific Islander COVID-19 Response, Recovery and Resilience Team (NHPI Hawai'i COVID-19 Team) offers the following questions and concerns regarding reported plans for the Rim of the Pacific (RIMPAC) maritime exercises in Hawai'i waters from August 17 to 31,ⁱ in the midst of the Novel Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) global pandemic and rapidly increasing Hawai'i infection rates.ⁱⁱ **The NHPI Hawai'i COVID-19 Team requests clarification on the safety measures that will be taken to ensure that this large scale event does not create or contribute to further virus outbreaks in Hawai'i, which would have significant and severe impacts to our Native Hawaiian and our Pacific Islander communities.**

The NHPI Hawai'i COVID-19 Team is a consortium of organizations and individuals coming together in a coordinated effort to collectively address the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on our respective communities across Hawai'i. We believe that

by convening our respective agencies and organizations across sectors and areas of expertise, we are stronger.

As you may be aware, Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander communities are both contracting COVID-19 at a much higher rate than the rest of Hawai'i's resident population. A recent study from the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa's John A. Burns School of Medicine (JABSOM) shows that the highest rates of positive COVID-19 cases in several U.S. states, including Hawai'i, are among Native Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders.ⁱⁱⁱ Indeed, as of July 31, **Pacific Islanders and Native Hawaiians comprised 41% of all reported resident COVID-19 cases in Hawai'i, despite only being 25% of the state population.**^{iv} Recent testing results further indicate that cases of COVID-19 are increasing in the Native Hawaiian and in the Pacific Islander communities at a greater rate than the rest of the state: between June 26 and July 31, Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander positive COVID-19 cases increased by 121% (from 249 to 551) compared to a total state increase of 86% over the same time period. Therefore, over the past month, Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander communities together have constituted 48% of all new COVID-19 cases among state residents.^v According to the JABSOM study, the higher rates of infection among Native Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders are linked to "preexisting and underlying inequities in the social determinants of health across racial and ethnic groups that are ubiquitous in the U.S."^{vi} For example, both Native Hawaiians^{vii} and Pacific Islanders^{viii} are more likely to live in multigenerational households where infected individuals may be less able to isolate from vulnerable family members such as kūpuna (elders) and those with pre-existing medical conditions.

Compounding concerns about their heightened risk of infection is the fact that both Native Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders in general are more likely to suffer from comorbidities known to increase the risk of serious illness resulting from COVID-19.^{ix} Moreover, widespread outbreaks in the community may also impact our islands' overall healthcare capacity, and the ability of many Native Hawaiians, Pacific Islanders, and others to access needed medical services—whether to treat COVID-19 or another health condition. Accordingly, as has become abundantly clear, both **Native Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders could suffer disproportionately from a RIMPAC-connected outbreak**, fueling our inquiries and concerns regarding this year's RIMPAC exercises.

Notably, Hawai'i is currently experiencing a resurgence of COVID-19, which has created an environment even more dangerous than was present in April when RIMPAC was first postponed due to the pandemic; ^x this resurgence only emphasizes the outstanding concerns that remain even with RIMPAC's scaled-down activities and a relatively limited number of countries planning to participate^{xi} (recently reported to be at least nine countries besides the United States, compared to the 25 countries that participated in the 2018 RIMPAC^{xii}). Several community groups and thousands of individuals have continued to voice concerns and opposition regarding the event,^{xiii} and the NHPI Hawai'i COVID-19 Team likewise maintains questions and concerns regarding safety measures and contingency protocols to prevent or mitigate the spread of COVID-19 among RIMPAC participants and within Hawai'i's population. As has been reflected in the cancellation of other, smaller-scale Pacific exercises previously planned for Hawai'i,^{xiv} we urge you to consider the health and safety of all Hawai'i residents, including

both Native Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders, as an overarching priority in all of your decisionmaking with respect to RIMPAC, and we urge your careful consideration of and response to the following concerns and questions.

First, the NHPI Hawai'i COVID-19 Team seeks clarification on all activities that may potentially expose the local community to RIMPAC participants. We understand from news reports that RIMPAC events will be “trimmed” and take place over a shortened period of two weeks, rather than one month, and note that “almost” all of RIMPAC activities will reportedly take place “at sea,” with the possibility that visiting ships “might” enter Pearl Harbor for brief logistics stops.^{xv} However, it is still not clear what activities will be conducted on land, including which and how many participants may be allowed to disembark, with whom they may interact, and what safety protocols will be in place to eliminate or mitigate the risk of transmission or spread of COVID-19 in such instances. Even with limited land exercises and disembarkments, given the high potential for rapid and widespread outbreaks to occur on vessels at sea, concerns remain that such activities may still pose a significant threat to the local Hawai'i population. It is also not clear whether or how any participating personnel stationed in Hawai'i will be screened, tested, or isolated when they do eventually disembark from their vessels during or at the completion of RIMPAC.

Second, the NHPI Hawai'i COVID-19 Team raises serious concerns about the potential for emergency situations that may result in the inadvertent exposure of the local community to infectious RIMPAC participants and the resulting need to utilize the limited healthcare resources on our islands to address such situations. Various reports of infections among military personnel and insufficient COVID-19 protections in military practices indicate a strong potential for RIMPAC exercises to result in a large-scale outbreak that could lead to the exposure of Hawai'i's population to infectious participants, as well as the rapid exhaustion of our islands' limited medical resources—even if activities are planned to largely or wholly take place at sea. In the context of naval vessels, any infection could quickly spread among the crew, and traditional RIMPAC activities (i.e., multi-force joint training exercises including the exchange of crewmembers) could result in infections spreading between vessels.

For example, asymptomatic infection was found in 60% of the 600 COVID-19 positive sailors aboard the U.S. Aircraft Carrier Theodore Roosevelt,^{xvi} showing that an infection in a military vessel setting can rapidly spread throughout its crew without detection. Overall, the U.S. Navy alone has seen at least 2,400 COVID-19 infections, highlighting the challenges the Navy faces in preventing COVID-19 spread on its ships, “where crew members work in tight spaces, share common spaces and sleep in tight quarters.”^{xvii} Since late April, at least 26 of the U.S. Navy's battle force ships have reported COVID-19 cases.^{xviii} Other countries have also seen infections within their naval forces: a Philippine Navy vessel already on its way to Hawai'i for this year's exercises recently confirmed that at least two of its crew members tested positive for COVID-19, were quarantined, and are receiving treatment.^{xix} In addition, France reported that 1,081 sailors aboard its aircraft carrier Charles de Gaulle tested positive for COVID-19, including at least two U.S. sailors participating in an exchange program.^{xx} **Notably, the transfer**

of personnel between ships as part of RIMPAC exercises could compromise even those ships that are COVID-free, and lead to the rapid infection of hundreds if not thousands of sailors and other personnel. Accordingly, even with current plans to not allow certain RIMPAC participants to come ashore, there may be a high potential for emergency situations, including widespread COVID-19 outbreaks, that may result in the removal of both symptomatic and asymptomatic military personnel from their vessels and brought on land for medical or other assistance, exposing local residents to infectious cases and further straining a limited island healthcare capacity that is already nearing its limit.^{xxi}

We note that the above concerns regarding the exposure of Hawai'i's population to RIMPAC participants who may have been infected as a result of RIMPAC exercises, may also be extended to all home or subsequent ports of landing for participating vessels, including indigenous, aboriginal, or first nations communities that may be particularly vulnerable to the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic.

We further note that the U.S. Department of Defense's order for all military to stop reporting COVID-19 cases at the local level^{xxii} significantly increases concerns about the need for greater transparency and trust^{xxiii} in the U.S. military's readiness and ability to respond appropriately to the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly with regards to the upcoming RIMPAC exercises.^{xxiv} These concerns strongly counsel the adoption of much greater transparency practices, including the reporting of information relating to infection rates and spread within the military community and associated groups, prior to, during, and subsequent to RIMPAC.

For the above reasons, the NHPI Hawai'i COVID-19 Team seeks clarification on the following questions to understand and respond to the risks that this year's RIMPAC exercises may pose to the health and safety of Hawai'i residents, especially our Native Hawaiian and our Pacific Islander communities:

1. How will each vessel participating in RIMPAC exercises, including U.S. Navy vessels, verify they are COVID-19 free prior to, during, and at the conclusion of RIMPAC?
2. What is the testing capacity of each ship to monitor COVID-19 infections among crew?
3. To what extent and under what circumstances will those participating in ship-based RIMPAC exercises transfer between ships?
4. What specific protocols will be in place to minimize the spread of COVID-19 on any vessel where an infection is detected?
5. To what extent will RIMPAC participants disembark from their ships as part of planned RIMPAC activities?
6. What steps will be taken to inform the public, and what contact tracing protocols will be followed, in the event that a RIMPAC participant or associated individual contracts COVID-19 prior to, during, or at the conclusion of RIMPAC activities,

including participating military personnel stationed on Hawai'i and those who may have been exposed to such personnel?

7. If an emergency situation arises during the RIMPAC exercises requiring the full or partial evacuation of a vessel, how will participants be strictly quarantined and isolated from others (including locally-stationed military)?
8. In the case of unforeseen events (ranging from training accidents to COVID-19 outbreaks), will affected personnel be treated offshore, or is there a possibility that they will need to rely on our local healthcare resources? What contingency plans, if any, will provide for medical care of such personnel if local healthcare resources are already fully utilized?
9. What support will be provided to participating vessels, including non-U.S. Navy vessels, to ensure that any COVID-19 infections or outbreaks resulting from RIMPAC exercises do not impact populations at their subsequent ports of landing, including indigenous, aboriginal, and first nations communities that may be particularly vulnerable to infection or the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic?

Mahalo nui loa for your time and attention on this matter. For any questions or concerns, please feel free to contact Dr. Sheri Daniels, NHPI Hawai'i COVID-19 Team co-lead, at 597-6550 or via e-mail at manao@papaolalokahi.org.

Aloha me ka 'oia'i'o,



Joseph Keawe'aimoku Kaholokula
Native Hawaiian Co-Lead



Felea'i Tau
Pacific Islander Co-Lead



Sheri Daniels
Native Hawaiian Co-Lead



Josie Howard
Pacific Islander Co-Lead

CC:
Governor David Y. Ige
Lieutenant Governor Josh Green
Major General Kenneth S. Hara

ⁱ COMMANDER, U.S. PACIFIC FLEET (Apr. 29, 2020), <https://www.cpf.navy.mil/news.aspx/130607>.

ⁱⁱ Allyson Blair, *After Jaw-Dropping 109 New Coronavirus Cases, State Considers Reinstating Mandates*, HAW. NEWS NOW (July 30, 2020), <https://www.hawaiinewsnow.com/2020/07/29/hawaii-reports-new-covid-cases/>.

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- v *What You Should Know*, HAW. DEP'T HEALTH DISEASE OUTBREAK & CONTROL DIVISION, <https://health.hawaii.gov/coronavirusdisease2019/what-you-should-know/current-situation-in-hawaii/> (last accessed July 28, 2020).
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- ix Ku'uwehi Hirashi, *Native Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders Face Higher Rates of COVID-19*, HAW. PUB. RADIO (Apr. 27, 2020), <https://www.hawaiipublicradio.org/post/native-hawaiians-pacific-islanders-face-higher-rates-covid-19-1#stream/0>; see also OFFICE OF HAWAIIAN AFFAIRS, ISSUE BRIEF: COVID-19 AND NATIVE HAWAIIAN COMMUNITIES: NATIVE HAWAIIANS OVER-REPRESENTED IN COVID-19 AT-RISK POPULATIONS (2019), https://19of32x2yl33s8o4xza0gf14-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/Issue-Brief.-Covid-19_corrected.pdf.
- x *Navy Agrees to Postpone RIMPAC 2020*, KHON2 NEWS HAW. (Apr. 29, 2020), <https://www.khon2.com/coronavirus/navy-agrees-to-postpone-rimpac-2020/>.
- xi William Cole, *Foreign Ships Converging on Hawaii for Scaled-Back RIMPAC*, HONOLULU STAR ADVERTISER (Aug. 1, 2020), <https://www.staradvertiser.com/2020/08/01/hawaii-news/foreign-ships-converging-on-hawaii-for-scaled-back-rimpac/>.
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- xiv The U.S. Indo-Pacific Command's Exercise Balikatan 2020 in the Philippines and Australia's 2020 Marine Rotational Force have been cancelled. William Cole, *RIMPAC Still On, Other Military Exercises Canceled*, HONOLULU STAR ADVERTISER (Mar. 31, 2020), <https://www.staradvertiser.com/2020/03/31/hawaii-news/rimpac-still-on-other-military-exercises-canceled/>.
- xv William Cole, *Foreign Ships Converging on Hawaii for Scaled-Back RIMPAC*, HONOLULU STAR ADVERTISER (Aug. 1, 2020), <https://www.staradvertiser.com/2020/08/01/hawaii-news/foreign-ships-converging-on-hawaii-for-scaled-back-rimpac/>.

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^{xvii} Gina Harkins, *Navy Announces New Rules for Deploying After Ships' COVID-19 Outbreaks*, MILITARY.COM (May 27, 2020), <https://www.military.com/daily-news/2020/05/27/navy-announces-new-rules-deploying-after-ships-covid-19-outbreaks.html>.

^{xviii} Ben Werner, *26 Navy Battle Force Ships Have Had COVID-19*, U.S. NAVAL INST. NEWS (Apr. 23, 2020), <https://news.usni.org/2020/04/23/26-navy-battle-force-ships-have-had-covid-19-cases>.

^{xix} Kevin Knodell, *Two Philippine Navy Sailors In Quarantine As New Frigate Prepares for RIMPAC*, HONOLULU CIV. BEAT (July 23, 2020), <https://www.civilbeat.org/beat/two-philippine-navy-sailors-in-quarantine-as-new-frigate-prepares-for-rimpac/>.

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^{xxi} Allyson Blair, *In 'Sobering' Warning, Lt. Gov. Green says Hawaii ICUs Could be Full by the End of the Month*, HAW. NEWS NOW (Aug. 6, 2020), <https://www.hawaiinewsnow.com/2020/08/05/green-warns-hawaii-ic-us-could-reach-max-capacity-by-end-month/>.

^{xxii} William Cole, *Military Won't Say How Many Coronavirus Cases in Hawaii*, HONOLULU STAR ADVERTISER (Apr. 9, 2020), <https://www.staradvertiser.com/2020/04/09/hawaii-news/military-wont-say-how-many-covid-19-cases-in-hawaii/>.

^{xxiii} Kevin Knodell, *Military In Hawaii Copes with Pandemic Challenges*, HONOLULU CIV. BEAT (June 26, 2020), <https://www.civilbeat.org/2020/06/military-in-hawaii-cope-with-pandemic-challenges/> (“In a few incidents, the pandemic has highlighted the sometimes fraught relationship between Hawaii['] residents and service members stationed in the islands.”).

^{xxiv} William Cole, *Hawaii's Military COVID-19 Case Count Still a Mystery*, HONOLULU STAR ADVERTISER (Aug. 5, 2020), <https://www.staradvertiser.com/2020/08/05/hawaii-news/hawaiis-military-covid-19-case-count-still-a-mystery/>.