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## Military could spend \$354M for Guam projects

Louella Losinio | The Guam Daily Post 11 hrs ago



**DEFENSE SPENDING:** These box trusses, shown in September last year, are part of a military construction project to house the MV-22B Osprey tilt rotor aircraft hangar, to support the relocation of U.S. Marines to Guam. The House Armed Services Committee recently approved the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal 2018, which would authorize \$354 million for Guam. Photo courtesy of the U.S. Marine Corps

The House Armed Services Committee has approved the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal 2018, which would authorize \$354 million for Guam, out of \$9.7 billion in military construction projects.

The funding for military construction projects in Guam is key to the planned relocation of about 5,000 Marines from Okinawa to a new base on the island several years from now.

The defense spending bill was reported to the full House of Representatives by an overwhelming 60-1 approval.

Guam Delegate Madeleine Bordallo made the announcement yesterday, saying "the bill demonstrates Congress' continued commitment to move forward with the realignment of Marines from Okinawa to Guam, and address related local challenges."

The Guam part of the spending bill includes \$40.8 million for housing facilities at Andersen Air Force Base, which will host Marines' families; \$56 million for a water well field; and \$75 million for an aircraft maintenance hangar.

### **H-2B visa denials**

While previous defense appropriation acts also incorporate significant budgets for military construction to support the realignment, Guam's limited workforce capability as a result of the spate of H-2B visa denials remains a challenge.

During the last cycle, Bordallo had attempted to include legislation in the House-passed 2017 defense spending bill that would provide some relief for Guam's need of skilled foreign construction workers on H-2B visas, but the provision was removed.

The fiscal 2018 version also contains a provision addressing the current H-2B visa issue impacting island industries. The provision, incorporated by Bordallo, provides the U.S. Customs and Immigration Services flexibility to reverse the near-100 percent rate of denial for H-2B visas specific to military construction and the health care sectors in Guam.

The provision also extends Guam's exemption from the national cap on H-2B hiring to Oct. 1, 2020. According to the USCIS website, current exemptions for Guam only extend up to Dec. 31, 2019.

"We must ensure that Guam has an adequate workforce to meet military and civilian needs, particularly for our construction and health care industries," Bordallo said.

Guam continues to be at an H-2B hiring standstill. Guam had about 1,500 workers in March 2016, but visa expirations have reduced that to just around 260 by the end of February. Last month, temporary worker numbers reflected less than half of the February figures.

### **Other provisions of the bill**

The National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal 2018 also includes provisions for:

- the transfer of the former Navy Ship Repair Facility to the Guam Economic Development Authority for the use of ship repair and other military maintenance purposes, at no cost to the government of Guam;
- an independent review by the Government Accountability Office on the federal government's handling of Agent Orange in Guam;
- the secretary of defense to report on steps taken to formalize the Department of Defense's policy for the protection of cultural heritage and property during armed conflict in which the United States is engaged;
- the Navy to address outstanding concerns related to requirements associated with clearance of munitions and explosives of concern;
- a \$123.9 million appropriation for the implementation of the 2010 Compact Review Agreement with Palau.

The bill now moves to the full House of Representatives for consideration, according to a release.

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