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Chairperson

Committee on Environment, Revenue and Taxation, and Procurement

I MINA'TRENTAI SINGKO NA LIHESLATURAN GUÁHAN

35TH GUAM LEGISLATURE

PRESS RELEASE

Senator Perez Introduces Bill for Prevention and Prosecution of Wildfire Threats

Guam, March 12, 2020 – On Thursday morning, Senator Sabina Perez, Speaker Muña Barnes and Senator Ridgell introduced Bill No. 314-35, which seeks to add the burning of “forest land” as an additional prohibited action under Guam’s arson statute. By strengthening the law, Bill 314-35 aims to address serious wildfires which pose a threat to the life, homes, businesses, and property of the people of Guam, in addition to Guam’s wildlife and environment.

Wildfires on Guam burn on average 3.5% of the island’s area each year. “Uncontrolled fires threaten native and endangered species, and open areas up to nuisance plant invasions, especially swordgrass, which further increases future fire risk,” said Senator Perez.

In communication with the Office of the Attorney General of Guam, the Guam Bureau of Statistics and Plans’ Guam Coastal Management Program, and the Guam Department of Agriculture’s Forestry & Soil Resources Division, authorities confirm that poachers are using arson when hunting for game. “Arsonists are setting dangerous, uncontrolled wildfires that threaten lives, property, and our environment. We must update our statutes to help protect against this serious threat,” said Senator Perez.

Bill 314-35 will outlaw the reckless burning of “forest land”, defined as “any brush covered land, cut-over land, forest, grasslands, jungle, or woods.” By including “forest lands” in the arson statute, the proposed measure would allow the AG’s Office to better prosecute these poachers. “The state of California has adopted similar language, which enabled them to better enforce arson laws against those to intentionally set wildfires,” said Senator Perez,

According to the Pacific Fire Exchange, a federally funded consortium of researchers and government entities in the Pacific region who exchange data and science on fire-related topics, in 2018, 468 wildfires burned nearly 6,251 acres of Guam (4.7% of the island). 290 of those acres burned were native forest. Wildfires are rarely started due to natural causes, such as lightning. According to the Pacific Fire Exchange, most wildfires are set by people.

“Wildfires not only endanger lives and property, but they also threaten our marine ecosystem and fishing way of life,” said Senator Perez. “Wildfires contribute significantly to the erosion that flows into Guam’s waterways, harming Guam’s coral reefs and fish stocks,” she explained.

“By clearly outlawing the reckless burning of ‘forest land’, Bill 314-35 makes Guam’s arson statutes more consistent and easier to apply, and will help keep Guam’s residents, property, and the environment more secure from this significant threat,” said Senator Perez.

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