

DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE

Department of Commerce Temporary General Applicability Public Interest Waiver for Federal Financial Assistance Awarded for Infrastructure Projects Located in the U.S. Pacific Island Territories of the Commonwealth of Northern Mariana Islands (CNMI), Guam, and American Samoa, Collectively Referred to as Pacific Island Territories

1. Summary

Agency: Department of Commerce.

Waiver: The Department of Commerce (Department) is issuing a temporary general applicability public interest waiver of the requirements of Section 70914(a) of the Build America, Buy America Act (BABA) included in the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA) (Pub. L. No. 117-58) for federal financial assistance awarded for infrastructure projects located in the U.S. Pacific Island territories of the Commonwealth of Northern Mariana Islands (CNMI), Guam, and American Samoa, collectively referred to as Pacific Island territories.

This waiver would provide the time for the agency to collect and analyze evidence to determine if a more targeted waiver of these requirements is in the public interest. The waiver would also allow time for the agency to offer technical assistance to potential assistance recipients in the remote communities in the Pacific Island territories. The waiver will remain in effect for 18 months after the effective date of the waiver and will be reviewed as often as necessary.

Applicability: This waiver permits the use of non-domestic iron, steel, manufactured products, and construction materials in infrastructure projects located within the Pacific Island territories of CNMI, Guam, or American Samoa when the total Federal award exceeds the Simplified Acquisition Threshold of \$250,000. If Federal financial assistance provided by the Department is combined with other Federal financial assistance from another Federal agency and the total amount of Federal financial assistance in a single project is greater than the Simplified Acquisition Threshold, then the waiver shall apply to the Federal financial assistance provided by the Department. The Department applies the waiver to all awards obligated after the effective date and, in the case of awards obligated prior to the effective date, all expenditures for non-domestic iron, steel, manufactured products, and construction materials incurred after the effective date.

2. Background

The Buy America preference set forth in section 70914(a) of BABA included in the IIJA, requires all iron, steel, manufactured products, and construction materials used for infrastructure projects under federal financial assistance awards be produced in the United States.

Under section 70914(b) and in accordance with the Office of Management and Budget (OMB)'s Guidance Memorandum M-22-11, *Initial Implementation Guidance on Application of Buy America Preference in Federal Financial Assistance Programs for Infrastructure*, the Department may waive the BABA application in any case in which it finds that: (i) applying the domestic content procurement preference would be inconsistent with the public interest; (ii) types of iron, steel, manufactured products, or construction materials are not produced in the

U.S. in sufficient and reasonably available quantities or of a satisfactory quality; or (iii) the inclusion of iron, steel, manufactured products, or construction materials produced in the U.S. will increase the cost of the overall project by more than 25 percent. All waivers must have a written explanation for the proposed determination; provide a period of not less than fifteen (15) calendar days for public comment on the proposed waiver; and submit the proposed waiver to the OMB Made in America Office for review to determine if the waiver is consistent with policy.

The Department provides grants to the three Pacific Island territories (Guam, American Samoa, and CNMI) – the Economic Development Administration (EDA) funds workforce training centers and business incubators; the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) funds coastal zone management and habitat restoration as well as marine debris removal projects to a mix of territorial government entities and local non-profits; and the National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) will fund broadband deployment projects to unserved and underserved locations. In FY22, EDA obligated \$430K for one project. In FY23, EDA anticipates obligating \$2M in funds for two projects and NOAA anticipates obligating \$5.2M in funds for three projects. In FY24, NTIA anticipates obligating \$9M in funds for six to eight projects.

3. Waiver Justification

The Department is granting a public interest waiver to waive BABA requirements in infrastructure projects located within the Pacific Island territories of CNMI, Guam or American Samoa. The duration of the waiver is 18 months after the effective date of the waiver.

Economies in the Pacific Islands are over 5,000 miles from the mainland United States and must import products via air or sea. These economies have few local heavy manufacturers and largely rely on established regional supply chains from east Asia, Australia, and New Zealand. Most goods, equipment materials and supplies are imported and rely on shipping with associated timelines and unpredictable shipping fuel costs fluctuations. Moreover, materials sourced from the United States lead to additional shipping fees and longer lead times, thus significantly extending construction activity schedules. Lastly, ongoing gaps in supply chain availability impact lead times for materials, increasing project timelines. For these reasons, the agency is concerned that complying with the domestic sourcing requirements in BABA may increase already elevated project time and costs—particularly in the short run—and seeks time to better understand the local manufacturing footprint and the balance of equities for residents of the Pacific Island territories. The agency is aware that substantial changes to shipping and supply chains to incorporate domestic sourcing requirements in the Pacific Island territories could take multiple years to establish. These economic and logistical constraints were also confirmed through discussions that the Department performed with its recipients and applicants in the Pacific Island territories.

According to market research conducted by other Federal agencies such as the Federal Emergency Management Agency in early 2023, CNMI and Guam stated that shipping costs from Asia are lower due to geographic distance and other cost efficiencies. They commented that there is a general lack of supply chains from the U.S. compared to Asia resulting in longer lead times from the U.S. for product delivery which leads to longer construction timelines. Standard products like typhoon-rated glass windows and aluminum shutters cost significantly more if sourced domestically. For example, representatives stated, “the cost of aluminum is double if

sourced from the U.S. Mainland” and “The shipping cost from Korea or Asia for a 20-footer container is \$3,000 but shipping from the mainland United States is about \$12,000.”

Representatives from American Samoa responded that: “As a containerized community, our territories depend on goods, equipment, materials and supplies to be imported.” They said: “we can purchase equipment from foreign countries closer to American Samoa and with reasonable prices and shorter shipping time.” American Samoa representatives also noted that availability of materials from nearby foreign countries such as New Zealand and Australia would be a significant cost savings to the grantors.

The Department has determined that it is in the public interest to waive the BABA requirements for Federal financial assistance awarded for infrastructure projects in the Pacific Island territories while working to gather more information on supply chains, costs, and impacts. This waiver is critical to provide the time for the agency to collect and analyze evidence to determine if a more targeted waiver of these requirements is in the public interest. The waiver will also allow time for the agency to offer technical assistance to reduce the administrative burden to potential assistance recipients in the remote communities in the Pacific Island territories where complying with the domestic sourcing requirements in BABA presents challenges. The agency is concerned that failure to provide these remote infrastructure projects such flexibilities could perpetuate systemic barriers to opportunities and benefits and limit the agency's ability to deliver resources and benefits equitably to all in these Pacific Island territories. Additionally, the Department may need to dedicate significant staff and contractor time to assist extremely remote communities with implementing preference requirements for the first time and to support the increased workload to process project-specific waivers. The Department is interested in determining if these concerns justify a targeted waiver and whether its initial assessment may or may not be borne out by evidence.

4. Impact Absent the Waiver

Without the waiver, infrastructure projects located within the Pacific Island territories will experience challenges with product delivery, availability, reliability, and project scheduling. Infrastructure project schedules rely on readily available products delivered within reasonable timeframes. Due to the extreme distances that manufacturers for products produced in the mainland United States would have to ship products to the Pacific Island territories and due to the lack of existing local product supply networks for these products, manufacturers may not be able to assure on-time delivery of compliant products and associated projects in the Pacific Island territories could potentially face unreasonable scheduling uncertainty.

On the other hand, the waiver will likely help grant recipients establish rules and procedures to manage the BABA requirements. Furthermore, the waiver will provide recipients more options to efficiently complete projects.

Uncertainties regarding capacity, shipping, and supply networks make domestic sourcing in the Pacific Island territories challenging for assistance recipients, shippers, and the Department staff in the short run. The Department is engaging to understand opportunities to leverage existing shipping and transportation processes to make domestic sourcing feasible over the longer term.

5. Assessment of Cost Advantage of a Foreign-Sourced Product

Under OMB Memorandum M-22-11, agencies are expected to assess “whether a significant portion of any cost advantage of a foreign-sourced product is the result of the use of dumped steel, iron, or manufactured products or the use of injuriously subsidized steel, iron, or manufactured products” as appropriate before granting a public interest waiver. The Department’s analysis has concluded that this assessment is not applicable to this waiver.

6. Duration of Waiver

The duration of the waiver is 18 months after the effective date of the waiver. The Department will review this waiver in 12 months to assess whether it remains necessary to the fulfillment of the Department’s missions and goals and consistent with applicable legal authorities, such as the IJIA, Executive Order 14005, and OMB M-22-11. The Department may, based on the results of that review, terminate the waiver, or take action to develop a new waiver in consultation with the MIAO.

7. Solicitation of Comments and Response

On June 16, 2023, the Department published its proposed temporary general applicability public interest waiver for Federal financial assistance awarded for infrastructure projects located in the U.S. Pacific Island territories for a 15-day public comment period on the Department’s Build America, Buy America [website](#). The public comment period closed on July 01, 2023.

The Department received four comments during the public comment period. Three commenters were supportive of the proposed waiver with two requesting an extension of the waiver from 18 months to between three and five years. One commenter opposed the proposed waiver because they believed that the BABA requirements should apply immediately to all steel used in infrastructure projects funded by the Department and they believed there was not sufficient evidence of the additional shipping fees and longer lead times.

After carefully considering these comments, the Department concluded that the information provided to the agency supports a general applicability final waiver for the Pacific Island territories. The Department determined there was a sufficient basis to conclude the absence of a waiver would lead to additional shipping fees and longer lead times and determined 18 months was the appropriate time to evaluate these impacts to see if a more targeted waiver is appropriate.

For more information on the Build America, Buy America preference, please reference the Department’s [website](#) or [MadeinAmerica.gov](#).

JEREMY PELTER Digitally signed by JEREMY PELTER
Date: 2023.09.01 14:58:12 -04'00'

Jeremy Pelter

Deputy Assistant Secretary for Administration,
performing the non-exclusive functions and duties
of the Chief Financial Officer and Assistant Secretary for Administration