WHAT ARE THE FREELY ASSOCIATED STATES OF THE PACIFIC?

The Compacts of Free Association (COFA) are international agreements that allow citizens of the Republic of the Marshall Islands (Marshall Islands), the Federated States of Micronesia (FSM), and the Republic of Palau (Palau) to freely travel, live, work, and study in the United States, and U.S. citizens to do the same within these nations. These independent countries are known as the Freely Associated States (FAS).

CYCLE OF MIGRATION

Many FAS citizens regularly traverse national and international boundaries and time zones, tracing paths to and from their home islands and the United States. Because of this cycle of migration, many Pacific Islanders maintain strong cultural and family connections across diaspora communities and with their island homes.

States and territories in yellow have the largest populations of FAS migrants in the United States (U.S. GAO, 2020).

HOW DID THE COFA BEGIN?

In 1947, the islands that now make up the Freely Associated States (FAS) of the Pacific were designated by the United Nations as the Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands, which was administered by the United States. The FSM and the Marshall Islands became independent sovereign nations in 1986 and Palau in 1994 upon entering into Compacts of Free Association with the United States. The COFA agreements allow the United States to maintain a military presence in the Pacific region, and in exchange, the United States provides economic assistance in the form of programs, grants, and services to FAS governments.

WHAT NOW?

More than 30 years since the original COFA negotiations, U.S. funding under the compacts is set to expire in 2023 for Palau and 2024 for the Marshall Islands and the FSM. Funding renegotiations will focus on issues of human rights, migration, economic assistance, and defense relations, which are expected to have an impact on students and families with ties to the FAS. Migration rights are key provisions of the COFA agreements and will not end in 2023 and 2024.

(COFA, 1985; COFA 1986; COFA 2003; Thomas, 2019)
Over 45% of households reported in the 2010 census that they had immediate family members residing outside of the FSM.

25,000+ Micronesians born in the FSM have migrated to the United States since 1986.

WHAT IS THE IMMIGRATION STATUS OF FAS CITIZENS IN THE UNITED STATES?

- FAS citizens have a unique immigration status that allows them to freely live, work, and study in the United States; however, they are neither “legal permanent residents” nor “qualified non-citizens.” This status can complicate access to U.S. government services such as Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Medicaid, and non-temporary driver’s licenses.

- Children born in the United States may be U.S. citizens by birth; therefore, many families have mixed citizenship. Remember that schools cannot require students and families to disclose their immigration status, and all children are entitled to public education regardless of their status.

Population Statistics (FSM SBOC, 2010)  
Migration Statistics (U.S. GAO, 2020)
The map highlights the five most populated atolls of the 24 inhabited atolls and islands of the Marshall Islands.

Approximately one-third of the population of the Marshall Islands has relocated to the United States.

15,000+ Marshallese are estimated to live in northwest Arkansas and in nearby communities in Oklahoma, Kansas, and Missouri.

Palau has one of the highest positive net migration rates in the Pacific region, meaning that more Palauans are returning to Palau than are leaving the country.

WHAT BRINGS FAS CITIZENS TO THE UNITED STATES?

- Education
- Jobs
- Visiting Relatives
- Military Service
- Healthcare
The Pacific region is culturally, ethnically, and linguistically diverse, which is reflected in students’ complex identities and family networks. Provide opportunities for students to learn about and reflect on their cultural communities.

The answer to the question “where are you from?” may seem simple, but responses from Pacific Island students are sure to vary widely. While some students may have recently arrived at your school from a Pacific island nation, others may have never lived in or visited the islands where their parents or grandparents are from. Providing space to discuss the variety of migration experiences may help break down community stereotypes and microaggressions that students may face.

The Freely Associated States celebrate national holidays for their constitution days, independence days, United Nations Day, and many other holidays of national importance. Look up a list of holidays and consider recognizing these days in your classroom or school, using the opportunity to talk about the FAS. This can be a way to introduce Pacific island histories and learn about how groups living outside of their home islands celebrate holidays of cultural importance.

- May 1: Republic of the Marshall Islands Constitution Day
- May 10: Federated States of Micronesia Constitution Day
- November 3: Federated States of Micronesia Independence Day
- July 9: Republic of Palau Constitution Day
- October 1: Palau Independence Day
- October 24: United Nations Day