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## Hawaii News

# State election chief receives \$10,000 raise

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Scott Nago: He is rewarded despite being criticized for his job performance

The state Elections Commission voted Thursday to give a \$10,000 pay raise to Chief Election Officer Scott Nago, who has come under fire from the public following the last two elections.

Nago will now be paid \$90,000 annually, up from \$80,000.

The raise was approved during a closed session by a 7-1 vote, with one abstention,

commission Chairman William Marston said after the meeting. The pay is 75 percent of the maximum \$120,000 that the commission can legally give the chief election officer under ranges set by the Salary Commission, he said.

No one from the public gave testimony.

The raise is the first for Nago, a longtime Office of Elections employee who first became acting chief election officer following the Dec. 31, 2009, resignation of Kevin Cronin and subsequently was tapped by the commission to take the job full time.

The commission voted 6-3 in May to give Nago a new, four-year term.

Marston told the Honolulu Star-Advertiser that Nago shouldn't be blamed for problems that occurred during elections in 2014 and 2012.

After Tropical Storm Iselle ravaged lower Puna just days before the August 2014 primary, the Office of Elections closed two Puna precincts on Aug. 8, primary election day. Nearly 8,200 registered voters were told to return Aug. 15 to cast their votes.

The situation made national headlines because there were potentially enough yet-to-be-cast votes that could've tipped the fate of a close U.S. Senate election.

Marston said no major storm had affected a Hawaii election since 1992. Consequently, no one in Nago's office had any experience in dealing with weather issues.

"So what did Nago do? He obeyed the law and the statutes. And if he's criticized for that, that's wrong," Marston said.

He added, "When the roads were cleared, Nago announced that the precincts were open. He did what he had to do to get the election completed."

Some Puna residents criticized Nago for first saying he was going to hold an all-mail make-up election for the two precincts but then subsequently choosing to hold the follow-up vote quickly and in person when many were still cleaning up from the storm.

Nago was also criticized for choosing to reopen only the two precincts when voters in other lower Puna precincts complained they also were prevented from casting ballots because of the weather.

Nago's office was also knocked after the 2014 primary when it was discovered that 800 absentee votes cast on Maui had not been counted.

But Marston said the system in place did what it was supposed to do and alerted elections officials of the situation. "There was a glitch, and it was caught by the system," he said. "The votes weren't lost."

During the 2012 general election, Nago's office came under fire by voters in some precincts who went to the polls and were frustrated by a lack of ballots.

An Elections Commission subcommittee looked into the matter and found no wrongdoing or illegal conduct. Commissioners said they would work with Nago to resolve “operational” errors that were uncovered. Nago said his staff identified and corrected the problems.

House Bill 15, adopted by the Legislature this year and signed into law by the governor June 30, makes the chief election officer an “at-will” employee. It calls on the Elections Commission to conduct a performance evaluation of the chief election officer within two months after a general election. It also calls for the commission to hold a public hearing on the chief election officer’s performance and determine whether he should be reappointed. The bill also standardized the distribution of absentee ballots for all four Hawaii counties.

In addition, the commission voted Thursday to interview the only person who submitted an application to replace Marston as commission chairman: Jeffrey Kuwada, former Maui County clerk. The interview is to be held behind closed doors Aug. 17.