

**LEGISLATIVE HEARING ON H.R. 8719 – GREAT BEND OF THE GILA  
CONSERVATION ACT**

HOUSE COMMITTEE ON NATURAL RESOURCES  
SUBCOMMITTEE ON NATIONAL PARKS, FORESTS, AND PUBLIC LANDS

TESTIMONY OF GOVERNOR STEPHEN ROE LEWIS  
GILA RIVER INDIAN COMMUNITY

September 14, 2022

10:00 a.m.

Chairman Grijalva, Chairman Neguse, Ranking Member Fulcher and members of the Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests, and Public Lands, thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony on behalf of the Gila River Indian Community (“Community”) in support of H.R. 8719, the Great Bend of the Gila Conservation Act.

This legislation represents an important next step in enhancing the role of Tribal Nations in the protection and preservation of an important geographical location in Southern Arizona.

Background:

H.R. 8719, the Great Bend of the Gila Conservation Act, was introduced on August 16, 2022. The legislation will provide protection to the Great Bend of the Gila National Conservation Area and the Palo Verde National Conservation Area (the “Conservation Areas”), and will also incorporate 60,000 acres of new wilderness which will bring the total protected area to approximately 437,000 acres.

The Conservation Areas are located in the Sonoran Desert in Southern Arizona and contain significant cultural and historical connections for the Gila River Indian Community and more than half of all of the Tribal Nations in Arizona.

In addition to providing necessary conservation protections to the Conservation Areas to prevent harmful economic and infrastructure development and further degradation of the landscape, the legislation will also provide important protections to items and places of great cultural and spiritual significance to Tribal Nations in the area, such as petroglyphs, rock art, remnants of ancient villages, traditional irrigation systems, and locations of cultural ceremonies.

Although variations of this legislation have been introduced in prior Congresses, there are important distinctions in this version of the legislation for this Committee to consider that provide an important foundation for tribal inclusion in decisions that impact traditional homelands. This legislation along with the two other pieces of legislation being discussed in today’s hearing create a model format that seeks to integrate traditional tribal knowledge, history, and expertise into decisions made by federal partners in areas of cultural significance.

The Great Bend of the Gila Conservation Act is in keeping with the Administration’s announcement during the Tribal Nations Summit last November that tribal ecological knowledge will be considered in federal decision-making. It is also in line with the September 7th, 2022

House-member letter to the Administration written by Chairman Grijalva and signed by Chairman Neguse and 41 other members of the House requesting the Administration consider expanding tribal co-management of federal lands, waters, and other relevant resources.

To elevate tribal participation in management of the Conservation Areas, the legislation would create a new mechanism for tribal inclusion in the form of a Tribal Commission that would provide formal input on land management within the Conservation Areas.

The Tribal Commission will be made up of a representative from each interested Tribal Nation with a historical association with the lands contained within the Conservation Areas. The objective of the Tribal Commission will be to provide traditional, cultural, ecological, and historical knowledge to the Secretary for incorporation into a management plan for the Conservation Areas.

The legislation requires the Secretary of the Interior to develop a comprehensive management plan for each of the Conservation Areas that provides for the long-term protection and management of the Areas. The plan will be developed utilizing input from the Tribal Commission, and consultations with impacted Tribal Nations, appropriate state and local governmental entities, and public stakeholders. Further, the Secretary is instructed to include traditional tribal knowledge to the maximum extent possible.

In conjunction with incorporating traditional tribal knowledge, the plan will go even further to ensure that the Conservation Areas remain open to use to Tribal Nations for traditional uses. These important provisions can provide a framework for Congress and the Administration in how to incorporate tribal historic and contemporary uses of the Conservation Areas and to create true federal-tribal partnerships for the protection of lands that are important not only to tribal citizens, but for all citizens across the United States.

#### Conclusion:

In conclusion, the Community supports H.R. 8719, the Great Bend of the Gila Conservation Act, because the Act recognizes the importance of incorporating tribal traditional knowledge into federal decisions that impact those land areas that have been occupied by tribes since time immemorial. By respecting and acknowledging tribal knowledge in planning for contemporary and future uses of these lands, these sacred places can be preserved for future generations.