

Buenos Dias le de Dios, Good morning. Mr. Chairman and Ranking Member and Members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony today. My name is Juan Sanchez, I am the Chair of the New Mexico Land Grant Council. The Council is a state agency tasked with providing support to Land Grant-Mercedes in New Mexico. In addition to my role with the Council, I also serve as the President of the Merced del Pueblo de Chililí, a land grant-merced in New Mexico.

Land grant-merced communities were established between 1689 and 1854 by grants of land from the Crown of Spain and the Mexican government in what is now the United States Southwest. These communities were settled and populated by our indigenous ancestors. When established our communities included common land that provided natural resource needs for the community's survival. These common lands were never intended to be privatized or alienated from a community's common ownership but rather

were intended to be managed and used collectively by the community.

Under the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, which ended the Mexican American War, our property rights were to be protected and recognized by the United States federal government. Our property claims in New Mexico were adjudicated over the period that lasted more than 50 years; the process was faulty, inefficient, inequitable and in some cases fraudulent and corrupt. Often federal government officials were directly involved in the corruption. The result of this unjust process was that millions of acres of common land were stripped from the ownership of the local communities and are now managed by the federal government either by the U.S. Forest Service under the Department of Ag or by the BLM under the Department of Interior.

As traditional land-based communities we have longstanding practices and customs that are reliant on the use of the natural

resources that surround us. These uses are the engrained in the cultural fabric of our communities. House Bill 2785 is a product of over 15 years of work between our communities and the New Mexico Congressional Delegation. It provides for the recognition of long-standing traditional use practices by our communities, and it will ensure that local land grant-merced governing bodies have a seat at the table when federal land management decisions are being made. The protection and management of traditional use resources is critical to preserve the integrity of our communities now and into the future. In the past our communities have seen our traditional use needs ignored or stripped away completely by federal agencies in favor of uses deemed to be more desirable.

Our communities are not opposed to the multi-use mission of federal lands; we just want to ensure that our uses are protected. We believe that our traditional uses are compatible with most uses found on public lands and in national forests today. Being at the

table and involved in the management decisions for the natural resources surrounding our communities is vital to the overall health and social wellbeing of our communities. We rely on the forest lands to provide quality water for drinking, for irrigating crops and watering livestock. We rely on vegetation products, like wild herbs, piñón nuts and pine sap for cultural practices and medicinal purposes. Our communities have the continuous annual need to access fuel wood to heat homes in the fall, winter and early spring. During economically challenging times, like those we face today, firewood is a basic survival necessity, as many of our families cannot afford the high cost of propane or natural gas. Additionally, our communities continue to suffer from the loss of communal grazing opportunities on land now managed by the federal government.

Over the years, traditional use needs have been ignored, largely because we are not always at the table when the land management decisions are being made. The required cooperation

and coordination between land grant-merced local governments and the federal agencies, prescribed by House Bill 2785, are critical to ensuring our needs are not ignored. The passage of this legislation would help ensure that federal land management policies and practices, regardless of changes in administration, will honor and protect our traditional uses, now and for future generations. As president of La Merced del Pueblo de Chililí, I can testify to the importance of having a good working relationship with our neighbors and adjacent land owners. My land grant borders both the Native American Pueblo of Isleta and the Mountainair Ranger District within the Cibola National Forest. We have successfully worked on forest restoration projects with both the Forest Service and the Pueblo. I mention this to highlight to the importances of land grant-mercedes being able to coordinate and cooperate with the local federal land management offices to both maintain traditional uses within those former common lands and protect those associated natural resources for future use.

Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member, and committee members thank you for allowing me to present in front the committee today. I would also like to thank Congresswoman Teresa Leger Fernandez for introducing HR 2785 and for working with our communities on the legislation. We encourage your support on passage of the bill. Thank you for your time and I will stand for any questions.