

Statement for the Record of Congressman Greg Stanton

Before the House Natural Resources Subcommittee for Indigenous Peoples of the United States

“Destroying Sacred Sites and Erasing Tribal Culture: The Trump Administration’s Construction of the Border Wall.”

February 26, 2020

Thank you Chairman Gallego and Ranking Member Cook for allowing me to share my thoughts on the egregious behavior taking place on the Tohono O’odham Nation in Arizona.

Congress passed the REAL ID law in 2005, and among its provisions was the ability for the Department of Homeland Security to waive “all legal requirements” when constructing walls and roads along the Southwest border. Under the REAL ID law, Customs and Border Protection is actively destroying parts of the Tohono O’odham Nation for the construction of a 30-foot wall. Earlier this year, CBP used explosives on Monument Hill in Arizona’s Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument to begin wall construction. This is a burial site sacred to the Nation that dates back more than 10,000 years. For the Trump administration to treat it with such disregard shows the lengths this administration is willing to go to fulfill a wasteful campaign promise.

In 1853, the Gadsden Purchase established the current southern border, disregarding that it would split the Tohono O’odham Nation across Arizona and Mexico. The reservation now spans 2.8 million acres with 62 miles along the border. There are currently 34,000 enrolled members, with more than 2,000 residing in the Sonora, Mexico. Construction of a wall negatively affects the Tohono O’odham people in various ways. A wall would disrupt the natural flow of water from critical sources on the southern side of the border. A wall would be culturally devastating as well. Every year, members make a pilgrimage to Magdalena, Sonora to visit the statue of Saint Francis, the patron saint of animals and the environment. This wall would be so detrimental to the Tohono O’odham’s way of life that earlier this month the Nation’s legislative council issued a resolution in opposition to its construction. Listening to and respecting the concerns of the Tohono O’odham Nation is the right thing to do.

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) created the Organ Pipe Cactus Biosphere Reserve in 1976 due to its “unique resources representing a pristine example of an intact Sonoran Desert ecosystem.” The UNESCO biosphere program was started “with the intention to test and outline how humans can strike a balance among the apparently conflicting issues of conserving biological diversity, promoting economic and social development, and maintaining associated cultural values.” By disrupting the environment to construct a wall, CBP is affecting thousands of wildlife species unique to the Sonoran Desert.

On all accounts, this Administration is failing the UNESCO biosphere program’s vision and failing the Tohono O’odham Nation. It is destroying Arizona’s biological diversity and erasing the cultural values sacred to the Native Americans who lived on this land first. I am against the construction of a wall on the Tohono O’odham Nation’s land and am encouraged to see this committee holding a hearing on this issue. We must do everything in our power to prevent the destruction of our environment and most importantly, the indigenous lands in the United States.