

Opening Statement

Chair Teresa Leger Fernández

Subcommittee for Indigenous Peoples of the United States Remote Oversight Hearing on “*Strengthening Indigenous Communities Through Cultural and Environmental Preservation*”

October 26, 2021

- Good afternoon and thank you for joining us. Today’s Subcommittee hearing will focus on “*Strengthening Indigenous Communities Through Cultural and Environmental Preservation.*”
- Before we hear about various Indigenous cultural and environmental preservation initiatives, it is important to remind ourselves about our country’s history on this topic.
- Over the centuries, the federal government enacted cultural and physical violence policies against American Indian and Alaska Native communities.
- Examples of these harmful policies include creating Indian boarding schools and the dissolution of tribal governments and lands during the “Termination Era.”
- Many Indigenous Peoples were threatened, and generations of tribal cultures were prevented from engaging in traditional religions. The official policies tried to stamp out their languages. Language is key to

maintaining a world view and a culture. I am deeply committed to cultural and language preservation.

- In 1973 my parents helped write and pass New Mexico’s Bilingual Multicultural Education Act, which required that Tewa, Tiwa, Towa, Zuni, Keresan, Navajo, Apache and Spanish be taught in schools.
- More than 4 decades later, the court, in the Yazzie/Martinez case, found that Native American and other dual language students were still not receiving an adequate education in violation of New Mexico’s constitution and the Bilingual Education Act.
- This exemplifies how tribes must be vigilant and persistent in promoting cultural preservation. And how government must rise to meet its trust obligation.
- Indigenous communities continue to feel the effects of our government’s past outright attack on their very existence through cultural loss and intergenerational trauma.
- To counterbalance this assault, many tribal governments and organizations have dedicated resources for cultural preservation efforts to ensure future generations have access to their culture.
- And as we will hear, cultural preservation often goes hand-in-hand with environmental preservation.

- As we’ve repeatedly heard in this committee, indigenous wisdom can help guide our response to today’s environmental crises.
- The tribal leaders and organizers before us today are making strides in their communities to protect the environment while preserving cultural traditions for future generations.
- Many traditional teachings and lifeways strengthen not only the community but the environment around it. Often, traditional teachings are passed along from generation to generation, season after season.
- Overall, these initiatives seek to protect and sustain community history and cultures. Tribally-led initiatives also benefit from exercising tribal self-determination by providing new opportunities for education and economic development among communities.
- Put simply - cultural preservation strengthens each distinct tribal community and remains an essential topic for our Subcommittee.
- Today’s hearing will allow us to consider how we can support community-led tribal cultural preservation efforts currently underway and ensure that Indigenous communities have federal resources to promote cultural longevity with environmental protections.

- I appreciate this opportunity to hear our witnesses’ stories and hope we can all learn from their wealth of knowledge.