

Testimony of Rep. Jared Huffman
Subcommittee for Indigenous Peoples of the United States
Legislative Hearing on H.R. 7581, the Yurok Lands Act, and H.R. 6032, the Katimiîn and
Ameekyáaraam Sacred Lands Act
September 14, 2022

Thank you, Congresswoman Leger Fernandez, for holding this hearing on two bills that are priorities for tribes in my district, the Yurok Tribe and the Karuk Tribe.

I will first turn my attention to the Katimiîn and Ameekyáaraam Sacred Lands Act, a bill to place federal lands located in Humboldt and Siskiyou counties in California into trust for the Karuk Tribe. We've introduced this bill for the first time this Congress. Notably, Senator Padilla and Senator Feinstein collaborated with us on this have introduced a companion bill in the Senate, based on technical feedback we received from the administration and worked with the Karuk Tribe to develop. They recently had a successful hearing on the bill in the Senate Committee on Indian Affairs.

Natural resource stewardship of land, wildlife, plants, and water is at the core of the Karuk people's culture and identity. Yet 95% of their aboriginal territory is currently under federal management, undermining the tribe's ability to exercise traditional practices that have been passed down since time immemorial.

This bill seeks to return sacred ground to the Karuk Tribe, correcting a historic injustice. I've had the immense privilege and honor of visiting Katimiîn and its surrounding acres – these places are not only majestic, they are central to Karuk history, religion, culture, and identity. Placing them in trust ensures that the Karuk culture and way of life can endure for future generations.

Chairman Attebery will describe this in further detail, but for the Karuk people, the land identified in this legislation is the center of the world. The historical village and ceremonial site of Katimiîn is the location of a final series of annual Pik-ya-vish world renewal ceremonies. Ameekyáaraam, just down river from Katimiîn, is the site of Jump Dance and First Salmon Ceremony – both vital components of world renewal ceremonies. This area is essential to inter-generational teaching and learning needed to ensure future generations of Karuk people know and understand Karuk culture and customs.

Currently, the tribe has a Special Use Permit with the Forest Service that allows access to the grounds for ceremony. This access is not guaranteed and in some years the tribe is interrupted by public intrusions during private and sacred components of the world renewal ceremonies. Under this bill, only Forest Service lands will transfer to the tribe; all private lands, allotments and existing rights associated with those will be excluded.

Next, I'll turn my attention to the Yurok Lands Act. The revised Yurok Lands Act would expand the Yurok Reservation and support the Tribe's resource-based culture and economy. The Yurok Tribe has relied on natural resources from the Klamath River to the Pacific coast since time immemorial. From salmon to redwood trees, these resources have provided for subsistence and the cultural and economic livelihood of the community.

Specifically, this legislation transfers the Yurok Experimental Forest into trust for the tribe, which will support the tribe's ongoing work as a leader in forest management and conservation while ensuring continued use for existing Forest Service research.

The legislation adjusts the Yurok Reservation boundary to include the Experimental Forest trust land, Tribally owned fee land, and Forest Service land in and near the Blue Creek watershed, one of the most sacred sites for the Yurok Tribe. It also designates the Yurok Scenic Byway in the Reservation which will allow for infrastructure improvements and access to federal grants. Importantly, this legislation does not stop other Tribes from cooperatively working with federal agencies or hinder participation in the NEPA process under existing authorities.

This legislation is the result of over two decades of effort by the Tribe. Since the Yurok Tribe first discussed this legislation with me in 2014, I have worked with the Yurok as well as other tribes and affected stakeholders. Following a hearing before this subcommittee in 2019 and discussions that entailed, we made several changes to address concerns, which are reflected in the discussion draft before us today.

There have also been positive discussions between the Yurok Tribe and Trinidad Rancheria, who share a rich history. Both are Yurok people, along with other rancherias in Northern California, and this can cause tension. I hope we can continue a healthy, respectful discussion to ensure a path forward for the Yurok Tribe and their neighbors. I have made meaningful and significant changes that get at the concerns raised by neighboring tribes, and I believe that we've gotten this bill to a place we can all be proud of.

Chair Leger Fernandez, the wonderful thing about both of these bills is the wide array of local support. I have several letters of support for both bills that I would like to enter into the record, without objection, and will have my staff get them to you following the hearing.

I'd like to thank the Karuk Tribe's Chairman Attebery and the Yurok Tribe's Chairman James and their staff for traveling to Washington to be here with us today to testify on why these issues matter so much to their communities. It has been wonderful to work with both tribes on these bills and I look forward to today's discussion.