

**TESTIMONY OF YATCH BAMFORD
CHAIRMAN OF THE PIT RIVER TRIBE
BEFORE THE HOUSE COMMITTEE ON NATURAL RESOURCES
SUBCOMMITTEE ON INDIAN AND INSULAR AFFAIRS
APRIL 30, 2025**

Good morning Chairman Hurd, Ranking Member Leger Fernandez, and members of the Committee. My name is Yatch Bamford, and I am the Chairman of the Pit River Tribe from northeastern California. I am honored to appear before the Committee on behalf of our Nation.

I am here today to discuss H.R. 2400, the Pit River Land Transfer Act of 2025, a bill that would transfer more than 580 acres of federal land into trust for the benefit of our Tribe, along with more than 40 acres of fee land that the Pit River Tribe currently owns. On behalf of the Pit River Tribe, I want to thank Congressman LaMalfa for his sponsorship of this legislation, and for his strong representation of the Tribe during his time in Congress.

The land that we propose to acquire in trust through this legislation is known as the Four Corners Property (“Four Corners”), and is located between Burney, California and Fall River Mills in northeastern California. The majority of the Four Corners property is currently owned by the United States Forest Service (“USFS”), and is a visible area where two prominent highways near Burney intersect, making it a vital area for economic, conservation, and stewardship opportunities for the Tribe.

I. The Pit River Tribe

Before I go any further, I would like to begin with a brief history of our Nation and what the Four Corners land means to our people. The Pit River Tribe consists of 11 autonomous bands (Ajumawi, Aporige, Astarawi, Atsugewi, Atwamsini, Hammawi, Hewisedawi, Illmawi, Itsatawi, Kosealekte, and Madesi). For thousands of years, the Pit River people have maintained deep cultural ties to our ancestral lands, which are fundamental to our identity and our continued existence. Our ancestral lands are known as the 100-mile square, which is located in northeastern California near Mt. Lassen in the Pit River watershed in eastern Shasta County, as well as parts of what is present day Siskiyou, Lassen, and Modoc Counties.

Like every other Tribal nation, the Pit River Tribe faced extinction through continuous violence and forced removal from the lands that we had called home since time immemorial. Particularly, the vast expansion of American settlement in the west beginning during the Gold Rush era threatened our survival and existence, but we showed perseverance. From what were thousands, our population was dramatically reduced to a few hundred survivors. Today, our tribal population is growing and we now count nearly 3,800 tribal citizens.

The Pit River Tribe currently holds approximately 9,645.68 acres of land, the majority of which is held in federal trust. These lands are scattered across Shasta and Modoc Counties and span seven Rancherias, each rooted in the ancestral territories of one of the Tribe's eleven bands: Likely (1.32 acres - Hammawi), Lookout (40 acres - Atwamsini), XL Ranch (8,463.62 acres - Kosealekte/Hewisedawi), XL Ranch near Goose Lake (790.38 acres - Hewisedawi), Big Bend (40.42 acres - Madesi), Burney (77.89 acres - Atsugewi), Montgomery Creek (112.45 acres - Madesi), and Roaring Creek (80 acres - Madesi). In 1987, the Tribe ratified its Constitution, which was approved by the Secretary of the Interior, marking the official recognition of the Tribe as the beneficiary of the 9,254-acre XL Ranch Reservation. This action concluded a 23-year legal struggle and formally unified additional Rancherias and newly acquired land into the Tribe's modern land base, although it represents only a small portion of the ancestral territory described in the 1959 Indian Claims Commission findings.

The Constitution confirmed the Tribe's territorial and jurisdictional rights over its ancestral homeland, as described in *California Indian Land Claims Commission*, Docket No. 347, including lands historically recognized and those acquired in the future. It also reaffirmed the Tribe's authority to exercise jurisdiction over land, water, airspace, wildlife, and other resources to the fullest extent permitted under federal law. The Pit River Tribe has endured systemic displacement since colonization but has remained steadfast in protecting its land and sovereignty. Historically, the Tribe resisted white encroachment—especially after the 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo—by defending the land from fur trappers, emigrants on the Lassen Trail, and prospectors who found the territory both inhospitable and fiercely protected. Though the 1851–52 California treaty process excluded the Pit River Tribe, Commissioner O.M. Wozencraft's failed attempts to engage them underscore their determination to remain autonomous. The Tribe has long maintained that the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, and the rights implied therein, recognized their unbroken dominion over their homeland—rights that remain at the heart of efforts to reclaim and protect what was taken.

II. The Four Corners and a History of Activism

Dating back several generations, our Nation has a strong connection to the Four Corners from both cultural and historical standpoints. Our people think of the Four Corners as a central landmark of our ancestral lands that is intertwined with our history, identity, and how we will prosper for generations to come.

The Four Corners land also represents a pivotal and symbolic chapter in Indian activism and our people's constant struggle to fight for our sovereignty. During the 1960's and 1970's, members of Tribal Nations across all of Indian Country participated in a resurgence of efforts to reclaim

their ancestral lands through demonstrations and occupations. Members of our Tribe also bravely participated in this movement to reclaim vital pieces of our land, history, and culture.

Much of Pit River's activism during this period stems from the 1959 Indian Claims Commission decision that established what is our reservation boundary to this day. The Commission's ruling did not order a full return of our lands, though our Tribe had possessed the aboriginal title to our territory, meaning we had a rightful claim to millions acres of land which included the Four Corners. The fallout of this decision has resulted in generational challenges relating to further land ownership in the region, resource management, and protecting our sovereignty.

In the years following the decision, members of our tribe began occupying campgrounds and parcels of the Lassen National Forest, which resulted in arrests and subsequent trials for the activists.

On October 4, 1970, members of the Pit River Tribe erected a Quonset hut on the Four Corners Property, staking a peaceful, yet firm claim to a relatively small portion of our ancestral lands. Unlike other such events on federal government property, this demonstration was a statement of our intention to advocate, peacefully, for our land and heritage. At first, the demonstrators were left alone by authorities because they did not want to disrupt an ongoing trial involving members of the Pit River Tribe that had engaged in previous occupations on surrounding lands.

On October 26, authorities ordered the occupants at Four Corners to evacuate the property, to which the Pit River people responded by asking to be peacefully arrested on charges of trespassing, but the authorities refused. On the next morning, more than one hundred sheriff's deputies, federal marshals, and forest rangers attacked the Four Corners encampment. The eviction turned to violence which resulted in four tribal members being admitted into the hospital. In total, 26 individuals were arrested and charged with offenses such as cutting down trees, interfering with officers, assault, and failure to appear in court, but not one was charged with trespassing, which was the goal of the occupation.

III. Recent Efforts to Transfer Four Corners Land

For over a decade, the Pit River Tribe has actively been trying to acquire this land through various government processes due to its historical significance. In 2012, we inquired with the Supervisor of the Lassen National Forest about the USFS deeding the specific land associated with the Four Corners Occupation site without cost. The intent of this land transfer was so the tribe could build an interpretive center on the land that would be dedicated to this pivotal event in the Tribe's history.

For a period of time, it seemed as if the USFS was cooperating with the Tribe to go through with this process. This included exchanges of emails in 2013, to which the USFS indicated that the Tribe would have to submit a formal application, which included an official map, Tribal Resolution approved by the Tribal government, formal request, and a draft interpretive plan for the parcel of land in question. Accordingly, the Tribe submitted all the appropriate paperwork to the USFS. However, in the time following the submission of the application, the USFS communicated that they had lost the Tribe's paperwork and asked that the Tribe resubmit their request, leading to years of delay in the process.

The Tribe has since revived this conversation with the USFS and are hopeful the Department will support the land transfer.

In addition to pursuing the land transfer, the Tribe was able to purchase 40 acres on the southeast corner of the Four Corners Property in fee status. The now tribally-owned fee land is surrounded by the rest of the Four Corners Property that is owned by the USFS.

IV. H.R. 2400

The Pit River Land Transfer Act, H.R. 2400, is the culmination of more than 50 years of history between the Pit River Tribe and the USFS regarding the Four Corners lands. As written, the legislation would transfer the 40 acres of fee land that the tribe owns along with more than 580 acres of the Four Corners Property, which includes the original occupation site.

After some discussion with the Committee staff, we may request removal of the provision addressing the transfer of the fee property into trust from this legislation at markup.

By putting this land into trust for the benefit of our Tribe, this legislation would enable our people to be the stewards of a historical site vital to our history and culture. Additionally, we would be able to develop resources such as an interpretive center that would be able to share the true history of our people and our struggle for justice, while also creating opportunities for economic development, education, and environmental stewardship.

V. Conclusion

Passage of H.R. 2400 is the top priority for the Pit River Tribe. The ability to be the stewards of our ancestral lands is essential to ensuring a better quality of life that is rich in our culture and history for generations to come.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today. I am happy to answer any questions the Committee may have.