



The Catawba Nation
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Testimony of Brian Harris, Chief of the Catawba Nation

Before the House Subcommittee on Indian and Insular Affairs U.S. House Committee on Natural Resources Hearing on H.R. 4463, a bill to amend the Catawba Indian Tribe of South Carolina Land Claims Settlement Act of 1993.

Chairman Hurd, Ranking Member Leger Fernandez, and Members of the Subcommittee:

On behalf of the Catawba Indian Nation, I would like to thank you for holding this hearing and for considering H.R.4463, a bill to amend the Catawba Indian Tribe of South Carolina Land Claims Settlement Act of 1993. We deeply appreciate Congressman Norman's leadership in introducing this important bill.

What the Bill Does

This bill strikes a portion of a single sentence from Section 7(d) of the Catawba Indian Tribe of South Carolina Land Claims Settlement Act of 1993 (P.L. 103-116). That clause currently prevents the Tribe from enrolling any new citizen unless that person is a lineal descendant of an individual on the 1962 final roll and has maintained "continued political relations" with the Tribe.

If enacted, this bill would restore to the Tribe the authority to determine its own citizenship criteria as outlined in its Constitution—a right that is fundamental to tribal sovereignty.

Why the Bill Is Needed

When Congress enacted the Settlement Act in 1993, it was to resolve the Tribe's longstanding land claims and provide for a monetary settlement. The federal eligibility standard included in Section 7(d) was designed to help the Bureau of Indian Affairs and other federal agencies identify individuals who were entitled to share in that distribution. In our view, it was not intended to permanently limit the Tribe's authority to define its political community.

Those monetary distributions were completed decades ago. The federal enrollment restriction has long since outlived its original purpose and now serves only to constrain the Tribe's ability to manage its own citizenship.

In addition, the clause imposes a vague standard—"continued political relations"—that is legally undefined and administratively difficult to apply. Tribal staff must interpret whether an applicant has demonstrated sufficient political connection to the Tribe, which could create confusion.

Impact of the Bill

We understand that some may be concerned about whether this bill would open the door to unchecked enrollment expansion. We want to be clear: it will not.

The Tribe's own Constitution remains in full force and will continue to govern citizenship. Under that Constitution, all applicants must prove lineal descent from individuals listed on either the 1943 or 1962 tribal rolls, and each application is verified through DNA testing and supporting documentation. These requirements are strict and rigorously enforced.

Moreover, over the past five years, the Tribe has admitted approximately 200 new citizens per year. Denials based on the federal clause have been rare. Most rejections result from a lack of documentary evidence or DNA results disproving claimed parentage. In short, this bill is unlikely to meaningfully alter the number of individuals enrolled each year.

Conclusion

Congress has long recognized that the right to determine membership lies at the heart of tribal sovereignty. This bill simply removes an outdated federal restriction that no longer serves a purpose and reaffirms that principle of self-determination.

We thank this Subcommittee for its attention to this matter and urge your support of H.R. 4463. We would be pleased to answer any questions you may have.