

**STATEMENT OF OLIVER LITTLECOOK
CHAIRMAN PONCA TRIBE OF INDIANS OF OKLAHOMA
BEFORE THE UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES APPROPRIATIONS SUBCOMMITTEE ON
INTERIOR, ENVIRONMENTAL, AND RELATED AGENCIES
ON THE 2024 INTERIOR DEPARTMENT BUDGET
MARCH 8, 2023**

Request.

We request \$5 million for Peyote Habitat Conservation Initiative Demonstration Projects.
Department of Interior Office of Assistant Secretary-Indian Affairs.

Introduction.

Chairman Simpson, Ranking Member Pingree, Members of the Committee, my name is Oliver Littlecook, Chairman Ponca Tribe of Indians of Oklahoma. I am honored to submit this written statement to the subcommittee and testify in person. I am a lifelong member of the Native American Church, a church or way of life that is also described as the Peyote religion/ceremony. As a practitioner of this ceremony and a tribal leader I am compelled to express to this committee that you have a role in the protection and perpetuation of the Native American Church (NAC). The continuance of this religion and fulfillment of the 1978 American Indian Religious Freedom Act (AIRFA) policy declaration Pub. L. 95-341 is contingent on the survival of Peyote (*Lophophora Williamsii*) habitat. Without sufficient Peyote habitat the Peyote plant (our medicine) will no longer exist in the wild. The entire Native American Church ceremony is dependent on Peyote which is used/digested as a sacrament.

Today I stand in the symbolic shadow of the late Parrish Williams my esteemed tribal member who testified before both the Senate Committee on Indian Affairs and the House Natural Resources Committee helping to secure passage of the 1994 American Indian Religious Freedom Act Amendments Pub. L. 103-344. These amendments codified in the body of federal Indian law the legal right for American Indian and Alaska Native peoples to use, possess, transport, purchase Peyote for bona fide Traditional purposes. This statute ensured the protection of the religious rights to Peyote, the next logical interpretation of Congressional intent is to ensure the religious rights to the Peyote plant. This does not require a new authorization but rather a focused approach within Indian Affairs to secure a new future for the Peyote plant with dedicated appropriations from this subcommittee.

Current Crisis American Indian Religious Freedom

In 1994 Congress amended the AIRFA to legalize Peyote use, acquisition, and transportation for members of federally recognized Indian tribes. Congress however has yet to provide protections to the Peyote plant itself. All Peyote habitat in America exist within the nexus of

leaders to determine changes necessary to preserve Native American religious cultural rights and practices and report to the Congress 12 months after August 11th, 1978.

Now in his twilight days, I believe our longest living President Jimmy Carter would be astonished to know that not since his historic signing of the American Indian Religious Freedom Act and its initial report has there been an official review of AIRFA by any Administration or Congress. It is time again to take the needed steps to assure a proper and respectful review and evaluation in consultation with tribal leaders and traditional practitioners.

This Subcommittee can and should use its jurisdiction to include report language that requires the Department of Interior to engage, lead an Administration wide review and evaluation of Federal policies and activities in relation to the American Indian Religious Freedom Act.

Conclusion

100 years before President Carter's signing of AIRFA the Ponca tribe was removed from our ancestral homelands to Indian Territory. This removal nearly destroyed our tribe and Ponca cultural spiritual continuity. Exacerbating an already tragic scene our ancestors were inundated by agents and missionaries who were intent on eviscerating traditional dances, ceremonies, protocols, and cultural customs. Our ancestors proved resilient and passed down a wealth of knowledge that allowed our tribe to survive, that is the reason there is still a Ponca Tribe of Oklahoma in existence. As evidenced by my presence here today we carry on our cultural, spiritual, and political sovereignty as Ponca. Our government-to-government relationship exists because of our resiliency, we Ponca owe much of this sustained survival to Peyote. As the late Parrish Williams said many years ago to Congress "its good medicine" I say it today on behalf of the 3,500 Ponca Tribe of Indians of Oklahoma Its good medicine. From my tribal government to yours, let's work together to ensure there are Ponca people here hundreds of years from now to say the same.