

Testimony for the House Appropriations Committee, Sub-Committee on Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies

May 8<sup>th</sup>, 2:35 PM EST, Rayburn House Office Building Room 2008

Honorable Michael Rondeau, Chief Executive Officer and Tribal Administrator, for the Cow Creek Band of Umpqua Tribe of Indians

My name is Michael Rondeau, and I am the CEO for my Tribe, the Cow Creek Band of Umpqua Tribe of Indians. We are a Tribe of almost 2,000 Tribal members. Most of our people live within our ancestral homelands in Southern Oregon.

The Tribe provides many services to our Tribal members including health care, housing, education, job assistance and vocational training, behavioral health care, as well as a food pantry. The Tribe also provides health care and housing to non-Tribal members through our two health clinics and our rental housing.)

Our Tribe is an active steward of our lands that we have lived on since time immemorial. Our Land and Natural Resources Department oversee our forestlands and regulate the practice of our traditional life ways of hunting, fishing, and gathering traditional food sources.

We are extremely proud of the hard work that we have done to build a strong Tribal government that strives every day to provide vital services to our Tribal members.

I am here to discuss three of our most important priorities and I have travelled a long way to implore you to consider our requests. I understand that my time is limited, so I ask that the committee consider my full testimony which I have submitted in writing.

### **I. Land into Trust**

The Biden administration's policy of taking land into trust on behalf of Tribes is on the surface an admirable policy goal, and one that Cow Creek generally supports.

However, we strongly believe that no dollars should be appropriated to take land into trust for off-reservation casinos where a Tribe has absolutely no academically-recognized ancestral or cultural ties to the land they seek to have taken into trust. Allowing Tribes to disrupt historical kinship relationships with our homelands by doing an "end-around" of the law is not something that the Department of the Interior should be allowed to spend taxpayer dollars on.

There is one such off-reservation gaming project in Southern Oregon under consideration by the Interior Department which would cause catastrophic harm to at least five other Tribes in Oregon and California. And in a two-state, politically-conservative rural area within two politically-liberal states, this issue has managed to bring together an unusual, broad bipartisan coalition of liberal and conservative voices in opposition. This off-reservation casino has been opposed by 28 current and former members of Congress, including the congressmen representing Southern Oregon and Northern California, and all four of the Senators representing Oregon and

California. Additionally, this casino has been opposed by the current Governor of Oregon and the prior 4 governors of the State of Oregon, and the project was rightfully and legally rejected by the last administration.

The casino's proponents have presented their effort as a zero-sum game, only hurting our members in order to help theirs. But the facts show a very different story. Their proposed casino has been opposed by over 60 Tribes, and my tribe, the Cow Creek, is among the five Tribes who will be directly harmed, causing a profound disruption in our ability to provide programs and services to our Tribal members if this project is allowed to proceed. Five tribes' members would face cuts in health care, housing, education, and employment assistance programs. Our people would suffer, and these reductions in tribal services would put a further drain on public services offered by the states and counties.

For some unarticulated reason this administration has revived this project despite the fact that the proponent Tribe has absolutely no ancestral or cultural ties to the area. That Tribe is seeking to develop a second casino nearly 170 miles from its reservation and in other Tribal people's homelands. Further, the administration has been allowing this project to proceed despite the fact that unlike virtually all other casino proposals that operate under a two-part determination, here the proponents are being allowed to proceed under a novel path that completely cuts the Governor of Oregon out of the siting process.

We ask that this Committee appropriate no funds for any off-reservation trust applications for gaming where a Tribe has no ancestral or cultural ties to the land being considered for trust status, and where the Governor and the state they represent will be wholly cut out of the siting process.

## **I. Law Enforcement**

On January 8, 2018, after 164 years after the ratification of our 1853 Treaty, the federal government returned a portion of our tribe's reservation land as promised in the Treaty. This returned land as well as fee lands our tribe has acquired is scattered throughout Southern Oregon. Our Tribal Police officers work closely with County, State and Local law enforcement to provide public safety coverage to our lands as well as Public and Private forest lands. Douglas County, Oregon, is approximately 5,134 square miles, which is bigger than some states. Our tribal lands are spread throughout Southwest Oregon in a checkerboard pattern located between the Cascade Range to the east to the Coast Range to the west, therefore we have a strong need for a well-funded police department.

Some examples are our Tribal Government Office in Roseburg is located 25 miles away from the Cow Creek Tribal Police Department in Canyonville. The distance from the Government Office in Roseburg to our ranch property in Jackson County is 95 miles, which takes approximately 97 minutes to travel. We also provide law

enforcement coverage for our tribal casino, Truck & Travel center, rest area and RV resort. Because Interstate-Five runs through the middle of these properties, we see thousands of locals/travelers weekly.

Recently, we received funding from the BIA for Tribal law enforcement programs that were not currently funded by the federal government to support on-reservation and trust land law enforcement efforts. We wish to thank Senators Merkley and Wyden and the Oregon delegation for securing this funding. We also wish to thank this Sub-Committee, especially you Chairman Simpson.

We ask that this funding be both increased and made permanent, and that it prioritize Tribes like ours that have new and developing law enforcement departments that are in great need of funding to be able to build from the ground up, functioning police departments.

## **II. Wild Land Fire Suppression**

Our forest landscapes are experiencing unprecedented threats due to extreme wildfires, pathogen and insect outbreaks, drought, invasive species and rapid development. This collectively diminishes cultural resource values, fish and wildlife habitat, timber, and other social and economic values.

Current and historical policies and management, particularly the reduction of active management, the exclusion of fire and Indigenous cultural fire stewardship, are root causes of current forest conditions.

In our homelands, half of the local USFS Ranger District has burned since the enactment of the Northwest Forest Plan. The vast majority of the lands that have burned are in reserves with limited management. The entire forest should be cared for through proactive stewardship that includes Tribes.

Our Tribe has always and will continue to actively manage for what is important to us.

We must fund and require aggressive initial attack strategies. Wildfires are safer, less destructive and less expensive when they are extinguished when they are very small. We need you to fund the continued partnership between the BLM and the Oregon Department of Forestry. In our checkerboard ownership pattern it is the only model that makes sense.

We must also take a stance to actively manage our important natural and cultural resources for the benefit of the communities that depend on them. Without active stewardship through forest thinning, the creation of early seral habitats, fuel

reduction, and the intentional use of fire, forests encroach meadows, shrub lands, and woodlands, and grow dense.

Under hot, dry, and windy conditions, wildfires evade suppression, burning through dense forests, exploding in size and severity. Proactive stewardship restores the resiliency of forest landscapes to future wildfires.

Coupling Indigenous Knowledge (IK) with Western Science (WS) can catalyze proactive approaches to address these threats at meaningful scales. We recommend the following adaptive strategies to restore forest landscape resilience.

1. Direct funding to adopt proactive land and resource stewardship. Invest intentionally in BIA Forestry and Tribal Forest Protection Act funding to expand the use of forest thinning, cultural and prescribed burning, establishment of openings and other forest management at the pace and scale needed to improve deer and elk populations, reduce wildfires, restore resilience, and reduce reliance on fire suppression and disaster response.
2. Catalyze innovative approaches to forest management by effectively funding adaptive forest stewardship and long-term monitoring at stand to landscape scales. This is at the heart of adaptive management: learning what works best as conditions change to inform the modification of best practices.
3. Recognize and respect Tribal Sovereignty and Indigenous Knowledge. Establish and support Government-to-Government by funding co-stewardship partnerships with Tribal Nations and engagement of Indigenous Peoples at all stages of policy development, planning, monitoring, and adaptive management

Thank you for having me today and for the opportunity to testify before you. I really appreciate the time.