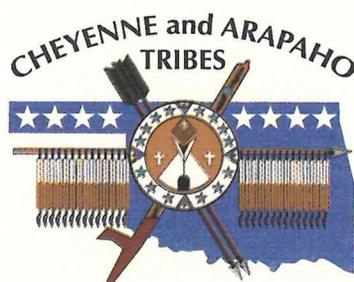


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REGGIE WASSANA, GOVERNOR OF THE CHEYENNE AND ARAPAHO TRIBES

Testimony of Reggie Wassana, Governor of the Cheyenne and Arapaho Tribes to the Committee on Appropriations, Subcommittee on Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies of the United States House of Representatives American Indian and Alaska Native Public Witness Day March 17, 2026

Greetings Chairman Simpson, Ranking Member Clyburn, and Members of the Subcommittee. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. I am currently serving my 3rd term as Governor of the Cheyenne and Arapaho Tribes located in Concho, Oklahoma. It is an honor to speak before you on behalf of my tribe. I begin today by addressing the Cheyenne and Arapaho Tribes' ongoing efforts to recover a part of our tribal land known to us as Fort Reno.

History of Fort Reno

Fort Reno was established by the U.S. Army in 1874–1875 on lands of the Cheyenne and Arapaho Reservation and today stands as a federal historic site near El Reno, Oklahoma; Fort Reno began as a temporary military camp in July 1874 to protect the Cheyenne-Arapaho Agency at Darlington after the Red River War and was established as Fort Reno on July 15, 1875 through a Presidential Executive Order by President Chester A. Arthur. The post was named for Gen. Jesse L. Reno and is found near El Reno in Canadian County, Oklahoma. These lands were the original reservation lands that belong to the Southern Cheyenne and Arapaho Tribes. •Fort Reno served in the Indian Wars as a remount station, hosted Buffalo Soldiers, and during World War II included a German POW camp and remained active as a military installation through 1948.

In 1949, the U.S. Army no longer had use of the site and transferred it to the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) for Grazing Lands Research Laboratory focused on agriculture research. The site has faced federal budget threats and cuts, and Grazinglands Laboratory has overlapped in data and research with other USDA ARS on agroecosystems such as wind erosion, crop and soil biology research. Similar or duplicative research has been found to be done by universities in Oklahoma and Kansas. The land at Fort Reno is not unique in aspects of tall prairie grass, croplands or farm pastures. The State of Oklahoma has the very same agroecosystem as Fort Reno. This same agroecosystem spans across the southern plains of the United States. What makes Fort Reno unique is its historic ties to the Cheyenne Arapaho people.

In 1937, a tract of a thousand acres (1000) was transferred to the U.S Department of Justice for the El Reno Federal Prison. The DOJ lands were expanded in 1963 to fifteen hundred (1500) acres in total.

Federal Actions Extinguishing Tribes Claims

The presidential proclamation (April 12, 1892) and later federal actions have extinguished collective Cheyenne and Arapaho Tribes claims to the Fort Reno lands. These actions and decisions are disputed as unjust by tribal members. Currently, portions of Fort Reno are preserved as a U.S Calvary historic site and museum, interpreted largely through a federal/local lens rather than tribal. There is no tribal history, culture or relationship with the Cheyenne and Arapaho Tribes.

Fort Reno has been specifically referenced in provisions of the U.S. Farm Bill multiple times since 2002 to prohibit its transfer from federal control without congressional approval. This action concludes that control is held over Fort Reno and the prohibition is tucked away in language in the Farm Bill. Legislative text has historically included language preventing the conveyance of Fort Reno lands back to the tribes, and the most recent discussions showed that Fort Reno is included again with exclusive language that transfer would require explicit congressional authorization. A recent USDA Secretary communicated to the Tribes leadership that it was the USDA Secretary's opinion that lands belong to the Tribes and should be restored back to the Tribes. The Department of Interior, Bureau of Indian Affairs also wrote an internal memorandum that the tribes' argument that they were never paid for the lands held merit. The Department of Interior issued an opinion authored by DOI Solicitor John Leshy based on the BIA memorandum called the "Leshy Opinion" that the Cheyenne Arapaho Tribes has a "credible, equitable claim" to property that was not included in the 1965 ICC settlement.

Why Return or Transfer Is Requested

- The first reason to request return or transfer of Fort Reno is to remedy historical dispossession. Fort Reno sits on land taken from the Cheyenne and Arapaho by federal action; returning the land acknowledges and remedies that dispossession.
- Secondly cultural and spiritual significance of the site lies within the historic former reservation and is part of the tribes' ancestral landscape; the Cheyenne and Arapaho Tribes would restore cultural context and access, better preservation and interpretation. Tribal management would center tribal histories, languages, ceremonies, interpretation and programming, to correct current and longstanding omissions of the existence of our tribe's people.
- Economic and community benefits would also be achieved by transfer of this land back to our tribes. This would enable tribal-led tourism, job creation, and educational partnerships with Oklahoma communities, including nearby Oklahoma City and El Reno as well as elementary, high schools, colleges and universities around the nation and abroad.

Recommended Congressional Actions

We recommend Congress authorize a study and consultation with the Cheyenne and Arapaho Tribes to document claims, cultural resources, and preferred outcome by removing Fort Reno/Grazing lands ARS from the Farm Bill while in this process.

We recommend Congress should pass enabling legislation to transfer title authorize return Fort Reno to the Cheyenne and Arapaho Tribes to remedy historical dispossession, honor treaty obligations, and enable tribal-led preservation and economic development.

Closing Statement

Returning Fort Reno to the Cheyenne and Arapaho Tribes is a concrete, lawful, and moral step Congress can take to repair historical wrongs, restore tribal stewardship of ancestral lands, and strengthen cultural and economic ties across Oklahoma. While the Cheyenne and Arapaho Tribes were paid \$1.5 million in 1892 by the Indians Appropriations Act, and \$15 million in 1946 under the Indian Claims Commission Act for almost five (5) million acres of reservation lands, this payment did NOT include the 9,500 acres tract land that was under Presidential Executive order, military command and remains unpaid today due to its continued use by the federal government for USDA and DOJ agency use. This land was carved out to be returned to the Tribes after military use. In the 1990's, Fort Reno was slated to be returned to the Tribes after the USDA ARS Grazing lands Research site was slated for closure. That did not happen, instead it was resurrected to be an unsuccessful monkey research station. This was done to keep the land away from its people, the Cheyenne and Arapaho Tribes.

Thank you to this committee for listening today. Hahou

