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Tribes from Across the U.S. Testify in Support of Save the Oak Flat Act *Act would Halt Massive Foreign-Owned Mining Project that will Destroy Sacred Sites and the Environment*

San Carlos Apache Reservation – San Carlos Apache Tribal Chairman Terry Rambler said he strongly supports Congressional testimony provided today by tribal leaders to protect the sacred western Apache site *Chi'chil Bildagoteel*, also known as Oak Flat, from destruction by the proposed Resolution Copper Mine.

“Today’s testimony clearly demonstrates that it is not only the San Carlos Apache Tribe opposed to this horrific plan that would destroy a location that is the heart of our cultural and spiritual beliefs, but that tribal nations from across Arizona and the U.S. are united in stopping this mine,” Rambler said.

Leaders of the [Inter Tribal Association of Arizona](#) and the [National Congress of American Indians](#) testified before the [House Natural Resources Subcommittee for Indigenous Peoples of the United States](#) stating that their associations support H.R. 1884, the [Save Oak Flat Act](#), introduced by Rep. Raul Grijalva, D-AZ.

Oak Flat is located on the Tonto National Forest and is slated to be swapped to foreign-owned Resolution Copper Company to clear the way for construction of a massive underground mine that would destroy *Chi'chil Bildagoteel*, which is [listed on the National Register of Historic Places](#) as a Traditional Cultural Property.

“We have consistently and adamantly expressed **unified** Tribal opposition to the Resolution Copper Mine and Land Exchange on behalf of our 21 Member Tribes,” Shan Lewis, President of the Inter Tribal Association of Arizona, stated in [written testimony](#).

In addition to Tuesday’s testimony, the [Navajo Nation](#), the [Ak-Chin Indian Community](#), the [Hualapai Tribe](#), the [White Mountain Apache Tribe](#), the [Tonto Apache Tribe](#), the [Cocopah Indian Tribe](#), the [San Carlos Apache Tribe](#), the [Salt River Pima-Maricopa Indian Community](#), the [Tohono O’odham Nation](#), the [Hopi Tribe](#), the [Pascua Yaqui Tribe](#) and [Fort McDowell Yavapai Nation](#) also submitted individual letters or passed resolutions in support of the Save Oak Flat Act.

The committee also heard testimony from an environmental geologist who warned that the Resolution mine would have broad devastating regional impacts on ground water supplies in the East Salt River Valley that is a source for drinking water for the Phoenix metropolitan area.

Nongermane language was inserted into the [FY 2015 National Defense Authorization Act](#) without debate that requires the Forest Service to trade *Chi'chil Bildagoteel* to Resolution Copper upon completion of environmental studies no matter how damaging the mine. The Trump Administration published the Final Environmental Impact Statement (FEIS) on Jan. 15, triggering a 60-day deadline to execute the land exchange. The Biden Administration withdrew the FEIS on March 1 to provide more time for analysis and discussion with tribes opposed to the project.

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“The only way the land exchange became law was through a midnight deal to include it in a must-pass defense spending bill,” Rambler said. “Congress now has the opportunity and indeed the duty to repeal this devious action by passing the Save Oak Flat Act,” Rambler said.

Resolution is owned by foreign based multi-national mining giants Rio Tinto and BHP. The land trade would strip *Chi’chil Bildagoteel* of [federal protections](#) put in place in 1955 by President Dwight Eisenhower that prevent mining.

With Oak Flat in private hands, Resolution could construct a one-mile deep underground mine that would cause *Chi’chil Bildagoteel* to collapse into a 1.8-mile wide, 1,000-foot deep crater. Construction of mine would also result in the depletion and contamination of scarce water sources, and destruction of large swaths of other parts of the Tonto National Forest.

Lewis noted that indigenous groups as far away as Australia have expressed concern over the fate of Oak Flat. Last year, Rio Tinto blew up the 46,000-year-old culturally significant [Juukan Gorge](#) cave rock shelters to expand an iron mine.

“Despite Rio Tinto’s promises made in the aftermath of this blatant destruction to never let this happen again, in fact, Rio Tinto plans to do the very same thing at Oak Flat,” Lewis stated. “But, in this case, Congress can take action and pass the Save Oak Flat Act and protect this sacred place and well-documented religious and culturally important landscape before it can be demolished to benefit the commercial interests of Rio Tinto.”

Fawn Sharp, president of the National Congress of American Indians, stated in [written testimony](#) that NCAI has passed seven resolutions opposing transfer of Oak Flat to Resolution since 2009. She stated that Congress had rejected 13 attempts to pass legislation to transfer the site prior to the last-minute inclusion of the Southeast Arizona Land Exchange Act into the FY2015 defense spending bill.

“The late rider to the 2015 NDAA circumvented what had been long-standing Congressional acknowledgement of its trust obligation to Tribal Nations,” Sharp stated. She also said the land exchange would cause destruction of tribal religious, cultural, archeological, historical, and natural resources.

“It would be the first time the United States actively sought to relinquish control of federal property to a foreign entity that would knowingly destroy the sacred places of peoples to whom it has a trust responsibility,” Sharp said.

Environmental geologist James Wells said federal environmental studies have failed to adequately study and fully analyze the profound regional water impacts from the proposed mine.

“The mine will consume enough water to supply a city of 140,000 people every year for 50 years,” he stated in [written testimony](#). “This is a vast new water demand in an area of the Southwest that is already experiencing water shortages. Resolution’s water use could be much higher than they are disclosing.”

Wells warned that Phoenix area cities, businesses and farms rely on the same water basin that Resolution will be tapping for its massive mining operation.

“By greenlighting this mine, the people of Arizona are embarking on an uncontrolled experiment on social priorities pitting the state’s agriculture, municipal and tribal interests against those of a multinational mining company and the mining company is winning,” he stated.

In a [written statement](#) submitted to the committee, Chairman Rambler said that the Resolution mine would irreparably destroy the “foundation of our religious beliefs” and the impacts go beyond the loss of *Chi’chil Bildagoteel*.

“The nearly 40,000-acre footprint of the project will also destroy dozens of sacred springs, and hundreds of other traditional cultural properties, including burial sites, petroglyphs, cultural landscapes, food and medicinal plants, and more,” Rambler stated.

Rambler also criticized Resolution Copper for never stating where it intends to process the copper ore into finished copper. *“Throughout its consistent shell game, Resolution Copper has stated that it will supply up to 25 percent of U.S. copper demands,”* Rambler stated.

This claim conflicts with the fact that the U.S. exported one-third of the copper ore, also known as copper concentrate, that was domestically mined in 2020. The U.S. only has three operating copper smelters that convert concentrate into refined copper. These smelters already are processing ore from other mines.

“Resolution’s copper ore is most likely bound for China, which is by far the world’s largest importer of copper ore,” Rambler stated.

Rio Tinto’s single largest investor is the Chinese state-owned mining company Chinalco.

“This one fact makes the entire project a strategic foreign policy concern,” Rambler stated.

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