

Representative Pearce--9/22 Testimony before Indian Affairs Subcommittee: HR 1461

I would like to thank Chairman Young and Ranking Member Boren for the privilege of testifying before the Indian and Alaska Native Affairs Subcommittee today and for taking up HR 1461, the Mescalero Apache Tribe Leasing Authorization Act, for consideration today. This legislation will prove important to both the people of the Mescalero Apache Tribe as well as surrounding communities.

This bill will do one simple thing: grant the Tribe the right to lease up 2300 acre feet of water (nearly 750 million gallons) from the Lake at the Inn of the Mountain Gods on the Tribe's reservation for up to 99 years. This water is not in use by the reservation due to a lack of present need. Therefore, the Tribe approached my office in accordance with 25 USC Sec. 177, and requested congressional authorization to lease this large amount of unused water. As the Subcommittee is aware, our surrounding communities are in the midst of a terrible drought with watersheds depleted to levels these local communities have never seen. Many parts of Southern New Mexico have seen no rain since October of last year. Plus, the US Forest Service might cut off the nearby Village of Ruidoso's access to the wells at Eagle Creek, worsening an already difficult situation. Recent fires in the Lincoln National Forest also show the dire need for expanded access to water sources, and legislation such as HR 1461 will undoubtedly ease some of this pressure on local communities.

The revenue gained from leasing this water will go to shore up vital services on the reservation, including elder care services, scholarship programs and infrastructure improvements. Mark Chino, President of the Mescalero Apache Tribe, stated that this bill would "provide the Tribe with a valuable economic opportunity and the ability to provide water to people in the area."

And with that, I would like to take the opportunity to introduce President Chino. He is retired from the Bureau of Indian Affairs' Law Enforcement Division, and is currently serving in his third term as Tribal president. I am proud to call him my friend, and I believe that the Subcommittee will benefit greatly from his testimony today.

Again, I would like to thank the Chairman and Ranking Member for holding this hearing today, and for inviting myself and President Chino to present our views on this worthy legislation.