

Testimony by Congressman Pittenger (NC-09)
Hearing before the House Committee on Natural Resources
Subcommittee on Indian, Insular, and Alaska Native Affairs
H.R. 3650, Lumbee Recognition Act
September 26, 2017

Thank you, Mr. Chairman and distinguished members of the committee for putting on this important hearing today. Mr. Chairman, I request unanimous consent to enter written testimony from Senator Burr and Congressman Hudson into the record. I would also like to thank Chairman Harvey Godwin, who has shown exceptional tenacity and leadership on behalf of his people. As you may know, my district includes many of the Lumbee Tribe's 35,000 actively enrolled members, and about half of their territory.

For 129 years, the Lumbee Tribe has sought recognition from the federal government. They have petitioned, and advocated, and gotten Congressional support along the way, however, they still do not have full federal recognition that they deserve. First and foremost, this is an issue of fairness. In heritage, culture, and many times in their relationship with state and federal government, the Lumbee are every bit as Indian as any other tribe in this Country.

Mr. Chairman and members of the committee, passing this bill is simply the right thing to do. Second, this is an issue of consistency. In 1956, during a period where the federal government was terminating their relationships with as many tribes as possible, Congress provided a unique status to the Lumbee Tribe. The Government recognized the Lumbee as American Indians, but stated that they would not be eligible for benefits related to federal recognition.

Since 1956, Congress has changed their policy in regards to American Indians. All such legislation passed in regards to other Tribes has since been repealed, except the 1956 bill that placed the Lumbee in legal limbo.

The Lumbee Tribe is not asking for special treatment, they are asking for parity and consistency in the way that the federal government views them. When the Bureau of Indian Affairs established its process for formal recognition in the 1970s, the Lumbee were once again denied equal treatment and barred from participating due to the 1956 Lumbee Act. They were denied a third time in 1989, when the Department of Interior determined that the Lumbee Act of 1956 prohibits the tribe from going through the BIA process, and the only way for the Tribe to obtain full federal recognition would be by an act of Congress.

Therefore, it is necessary that Congress act on this legislation. The Lumbee Tribe has many relationships with federal agencies, however, they are ineligible for some of the most critical benefits offered to other Tribes in Indian Country. These benefits have real life consequences.

For example, when the Lumbee Tribe's territory was hit by a devastating hurricane a year ago, they sought help from FEMA in anticipation of the storm.

If they were a federally recognized tribe, they would have been eligible for funds to help prepare for this disaster.

This hurricane swept through Robeson county, and caused overwhelming damage to one of the nation's 10 poorest counties. Today, the effort to just get back to the baseline standard of living in that county is frozen due to other pressing emergencies. Tribal efforts to prepare for the storm could have saved much of this damage from taking place, but they were denied because we have not acted on this issue.

These are not rare circumstances for the Lumbee Tribe, who have persevered time and again, making important strides along the way. I am confident that after Chairman Godwin's testimony today you will understand the injustice and discriminatory policies against the Lumbee Tribe. The Lumbee were put into this situation by Congress in 1956, and it is time we act and grant the tribe their much-deserved full federal recognition.

I ask that you right this wrong doing for current and future generations of Lumbee.

Thank you again, Mr. Chairman, for the privilege of speaking on an issue that is important to me and so many North Carolinians.