

Honorable Edmund Yazzie, Member of the 22nd Navajo Nation Council

TESTIMONY

Before the House Natural Resources Committee
Sub-Committee on Indian and Alaska Native Affairs
Legislative Hearing on H.R. 3822

“To provide for the Implementation of the property division regarding former Fort Wingate Depot Activity in McKinley County, New Mexico, and for other purposes. Fort Wingate Land Division Act of 2014”

Good Afternoon, “Yá’át’ée’h”, Chairman Young, ranking member Hanabusa and members of the sub-committee on Indian and Alaska Native Affairs. I am Edmund Yazzie, member of the 22nd Navajo Nation Council representing six (6) Navajo chapters; Churchrock, Iyanbito, Pinedale, Mariano Lake, Smith Lake and Thoreau. I am deeply humbled and honored for the opportunity to provide testimony on behalf of my Diné people.

We are here today to discuss H.R. 3822, the Fort Wingate Land Division Act of 2014. I would like to begin by first stating the land is our ancestral land. The land is known to us in our Diné language as “Shash Bito” meaning Bear Springs. Our elders and medicine people talk about how Bears and their cubs would drink from the spring. Our ancestors and Diné people consider these land sacred and as offering sites for our prayers, ceremonies and rituals. Prior to the military occupation of the former Fort Wingate Army Depot, the Diné people lived and made life on the vast land. Our Diné people grazed livestock, planted crops and raised families. Numerous oral histories continue to be echoed through generations of children and grandchildren whose families once lived free and proud on these lands. Oral stories of the U.S. military marching in and forcing the Diné people out are reminiscent by the displaced families of Bááháálí, Churchrock and Iyanbito. Stories of military men burning homesteads and crops are still spoken and

deeply engrained in the minds of our Diné people. These tragic events instilled in our hearts, our minds and our souls continue to cause great pain and suffering.

Our tears flow and our hearts break when history recalls the disbelief, pain, and suffering the U.S. Military so harshly inflicted on a people who stood proud doing the best they could to protect their families, their way of life, and their homeland. Our Diné people have suffered enough. Our Diné people were forced to walk over 300 miles in the cold winter to a place called “Hweeldi – the place of suffering; Fort Sumner, New Mexico”. They walked barefoot and crossed the mighty Rio Grande. It was with boundless oratory persuasion from our great Diné chiefs that we were able to come back to our lands within the four sacred mountains – journeying past “Tsoodzil” – Mount Taylor, the South sacred mountain, the beautiful red buttes and forested mountains was a welcome sight bringing tears of joy, singing of sacred songs and offerings of corn pollen honoring Mother Earth.. The Treaty of 1868 that we as the Diné people continue to hold dearly, and uphold the obligations listed.

As I present my testimony, I re-iterate that many of our ancestors are buried on the former Fort Wingate Army Depot lands. Burned and empty homesteads sit peacefully atop the mesas waiting for the return of their owners, my Diné people. Ceremonial shrines and offering sites wait to be blessed by our Diné medicine people and Diné people. The land has been preserved through these years flourish with herbal medicine plants and seeds, used in our ancient ceremonies. Oral stories from our Medicine people tell of our ancestors hiking the mountain to gather medicine and conduct offerings in select areas throughout the land. To this day we call the mountain to the south of the old Fort Wingate Army Depot, “Strong Medicine Mountain” - the mountain with the power of healing.

Our Diné warriors volunteered to serve as Navajo Scouts after returning from the Long Walk. The great noble leader and elder the late Jeff King honorably served the United States Army. He was the Grand Marshall of the Fort Wingate Army Depot Centennial in 1960. At that time, he was the last known living Navajo Scout and lived to be 113. He is now buried here in Washington D.C. at the prestigious Arlington National Cemetery, the only Diné known to be buried there. He performed Diné ceremonies for our young Diné warriors during World War II, including the now famous Navajo Code Talkers; as prior to entering battle to defend our land, our freedom and our United States of America. Our Navajo Code Talkers served in World War II using our Diné language to defend our way of life and the homelands for all Americans. Some of our local Navajo Code Talkers, the late George Smith and Albert Smith served proud and continued their public service to the Diné people. The Smith brothers have direct families who were forced off the Fort Wingate lands. Their grandfather the late Mike Smith his Navajo name was Salt Tall Man, lived on the Fort Wingate Army Depot land; one of Mr. Smith's descendent the late Navajo Tribal Vice-Chairman Wilson C. Skeet, who also was a World War II Veteran and Navajo Code Talker, at the time was 4 years old talked about witnessing burning Hogans, arbors, corrals and homesteads all done to force out families. His family was moved west over the Hogback to the Bááháálí area. Oral stories such as these have been passed down to children and grandchildren and continue to be very emotional to speak about it.

On July 8, 2013 the Navajo Nation and Zuni Tribe were brought together with Representative Ben R. Lujan, Representative Steve Pearce and Chairman Don Young to negotiate the former Fort Wingate Army Depot lands. After the meeting we presented

the information to our people in the affected communities. On September 15, 2013 the Churchrock Chapter passed a resolution opposing any land settlement between the Navajo Nation and Zuni Tribe. The Chapter cited the Diné people settled on lands in and around the Bear Springs area long before the arrival of foreign troops and missionaries. The land had been used to hunt, gather food, provide shelter and conduct ceremonies. It also cites promises made by the United States Army and government to one day return the lands back to the Diné people. Finally the resolution states that the Zuni Tribe has thrived around their sacred lake and rocks at the Zuni Pueblo, meaning living in one vast Pueblo village. I have respected the wishes of my Diné people and support their opposition to H.R. 3822.

Then in January 2014 the Churchrock Chapter had passed another resolution opposing H.R. 3822, the chapter cited lands adjacent distances from their communities will be given the Zuni Tribe The Sundance community within the Churchrock Chapter sits next to the western boundaries of Fort Wingate. Some families were forced to that location after being chased off their homesteads; other families move to Bááháálí, Iyanbito, Mariano Lake, Smith Lake and Rock Springs. The Iyanbito and Bááháálí Chapters also passed similar resolutions opposing H.R. 3822. All three chapters hosted a public hearing on February 28, 2014 to hear public comments from the people, community members and the general public; through the public hearing many Diné people opposed the idea of giving up lands and had major concerns of the remediation of the former Fort Wingate Army Depot. On March 1, 2014 the Eastern Navajo Agency Council comprised of 29 Navajo Chapters in Eastern Navajo Agency passed a resolution opposing H.R. 3822.

Chairman Young, Ranking member Hanabusa and committee members, my Diné people of Bááháálí, Churchrock and Iyanbito have spoken. They oppose H.R. 3822. They oppose giving up the homelands of the families who once utilize the lands for homesteads, ceremonial offering sites and grazing. They oppose the idea of having another tribe coming in and taking away their livelihood and homeland. They oppose another casino being sought by the Zuni Tribe. Furthermore I would like to mention that the Navajo Nation does have a casino operated in Churchrock and provides jobs and revenue to our nation. It had been mention in local news stories that the Zuni Tribe will be pursuing a casino. I respectfully ask each and every one of you today to consider and understand that our Dine People are deeply connected to this land. Oral histories, written histories, and archeological, DNA and physiological records clearly link our Dine People directly to this land. .

Furthermore the Bááháálí, Churchrock and Iyanbito Chapter are concerned about the ongoing responsibility for the federal government to clean up the contamination and hazardous materials on the land, soil, air, and water. They would like the assurance this will be the financial responsibility of the federal government.

I want to thank Chairman Young, Ranking member Hanabusa and the committee members for giving me the opportunity to present my testimony on behalf of the community members and Bááháálí, Churchrock and Iyanbito Chapters. Again may I re-iterate what my Diné people have gone through and continue to live through as the discussion of H.R. 3822 continues. This will once again open up the wounds of the pain and suffering we continue to face. Ahé'héé