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TESTIMONY BY GOVERNOR PETER M. PINO, PUEBLO OF ZIA, IN SUPPORT OF H.R. 3176

BEFORE THE SUBCOMMITTEE ON NATIONAL PARKS,
RECREATION, AND PUBLIC LANDS
OF THE HOUSE COMMITTEE ON RESOURCES

July 20, 2004

Good morning. I am Peter Pino, the current Governor of the Pueblo of Zia and the tribal administrator since 1977. I am also one of the Pueblo's traditional spiritual leaders. Accompanying me today is one of our tribal elders and a religious leader, Lutero Lucero. He is here because of the great cultural importance of the Ojito area to our Pueblo. Before talking about House Bill 3176, I would like to give you some very brief background on the Pueblo of Zia.

We are a very traditional tribe – one that has retained its language and cultural identity despite the fact that just 100 years ago we were down to only 97 members, and the fact that today Albuquerque is less than 30 minutes away by car, and its suburbs are almost to our doorstep. We now number about 800 members, virtually all of whom live on our Reservation.

Though we are a non-gaming tribe with limited financial resources, we have prospered as a tribe and as a people because of our strong culture and traditions. We strongly encourage self-sufficiency and subsistence activities. Most of us still hunt, gather, cultivate food crops, and raise livestock, just as we have for centuries. However, these activities, given the desert environment in which we live, require a substantial land area and conservation-minded management of our animal, plant, water, and mineral resources.

The Pueblo of Zia has taken unique steps to ensure that all of our tribal members have an equal opportunity to utilize these resources, and that no one exploits them. For example, we have a grazing ordinance that divides our range lands into units based on their carrying capacity. These range units are, in turn, shared by several families who are permitted to graze up to 20 heads of cattle each. This limitation means that while no one can make a living off of their cattle alone, all have an opportunity to raise livestock for subsistence and additional income. It also reinforces the close connection that our members have to the land and encourages our families to work together closely and cooperatively in managing our rangelands and their livestock.

Apart from subsistence purposes, we also utilize our lands and resources to generate much needed income for our tribe. For example, we have New Mexico's largest gypsum operation on our lands, a humate processing plant, radio and television towers, and pipelines. While these activities and developments provide vital financial resources, we strive to take a balanced approach to development, realizing the value of protecting other areas of our Reservation for grazing, cultural, hunting, recreation, and other such purposes. The Ojito area is one of those areas we want to protect because of its cultural importance and unique beauty. The area contains invaluable archeological resources and sites, innumerable shrines and sacred sites, natural materials used by our people in creating the pottery for which Zia is famous. We want to ensure that our future generations can use and enjoy this area for grazing, hunting, gathering, and the practice of our religion and culture, as our people have for centuries.

For over a decade I have been intimately involved in the Pueblo's long-standing quest to connect the two separate pieces of our Reservation separated by the Ojito area and to ensure the preservation of this rugged and beautiful area. As part of this quest, we have utilized our limited business and lease income to acquire substantial tracts of private lands in and around the Ojito area to ensure that private property owners in and around the Ojito area will not be displaced or otherwise adversely impacted. The couple of remaining private property owners who, like us, are ranchers, have been assured their property interests will be protected and they support the proposed legislation.

In addition to the support we enjoy from our neighboring ranchers, we have also worked tirelessly with the Bureau of Land Management, with State, County, and local governments, with businesses, with conservation and user groups, with educational institutions and museums, with our Congressional delegation, and with other interested parties to develop broad-based support for this legislation. We hope this cooperative and inclusive approach can serve as a model for dealing with similar land issues and we are very proud of the enormous local support this bill enjoys.

Specifically, while we originally sought the transfer of all 24,000 plus acres of these BLM lands, we worked with local BLM officials to come up with a transfer proposal that they could support. In doing so, we subsequently agreed to exclude the Ojito Wilderness Study Area and surrounding Area of Critical Environmental Concern (ACEC) lands. In addition to this major concession, we also agreed to continued public access to the BLM lands to be sold to the Pueblo, to commit to the preservation of these lands in their natural and open state, and to pay the BLM the fair market value of these lands. Though some of these compromises were difficult, and it was particularly difficult for us to agree to pay for lands that had been taken from us given our very limited financial resources, we are very pleased that we have finally been able to come up with a legislative proposal that the Pueblo, the BLM, and many others now support. I can also assure you that the Pueblo of Zia will fully comply with these conditions and will prove to be an excellent steward of these lands.

I hope you can appreciate how long and difficult the effort leading to the introduction of this legislation has been for us. We have attempted to comprehensively and fairly address the interests, issues, and concerns raised by the proposed transfer of lands and by the creation of the Ojito Wilderness. We have also gone to great lengths to ensure that no one's private property interests will be adversely affected, both with respect to the lands to be transferred to the Pueblo, as well as the lands to be designated as wilderness. We have spent millions of dollars of our limited funds to acquire lands within and adjacent to the Ojito area, ensuring the protection of those lands and avoiding potentially conflicting management regimes or uses. By doing so, we believe that we have transformed what may have started out as a "Zia Pueblo" bill into a "New Mexico" bill that enjoys broad and bi-partisan support.

In closing, I want to express special thanks to Congressman Udall and Congresswoman Wilson for jointly introducing H.R. 3176 and to all that have expressed support for it. I also want to express our appreciation to Congressman Pearce and his staff, and to our State BLM Director, Linda Rundell, and her staff, for sitting down and working with us on this legislation. Finally, I want to thank Chairman Pombo, Subcommittee Chairman Radanovich, and the Subcommittee for the opportunity to testify in support of this very important bill, and I am happy to entertain any questions that Committee members may have.

Peter M. Pino, Governor
PUEBLO OF ZIA