

Testimony of Reverend Deacon Salvador E. Alvarez, M.S.W.
Before the House Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests and Public Lands
March 29, 2007

Mr. Chairman and members of the subcommittee. I am Reverend Deacon Salvador Alvarez and I am here on behalf of the National League of United Latin American Citizens and the National Farm Worker Ministry.

It is a pleasure to be here today. I would like to thank Chairman Grijalva and the subcommittee for allowing me to testify.

I am pleased that this committee is considering the Cesar Chavez Study Act. This important legislation will authorize the federal government to study sites important to Cesar's life and determine whether any of them meet criteria for listing on the National Register of Historic Places or designation as a national historic landmark.

I worked very closely with Cesar Chavez. I was his liaison to the United States Catholic Conference Hispanic Bishops Committee and other religious organizations. He appointed me legislative representative for California and Washington, D.C.; mechanization research project. I was present during his fast in Delano in 1968, Arizona fast, and fast for life on pesticides. I was also part of a clergy delegation that went to jail with 3,000 farm workers in Fresno California, 1973. And I witnessed the spiritual leadership that he provided for a nation in crisis during the civil rights movement of the 1960's that continues to be carried on by the leadership of the United Farm Workers.

Cesar Chavez was an extraordinary person from very ordinary means. I am fortunate to have worked closely with him during those historic times. The influence Cesar has had on the lives on Latinos, Filipinos, and millions of others cannot easily be measured. His efforts led to higher wages, medical care, pensions, and more humane treatment of farm workers in the United States. His powerful legacy continues to this day.

We need only to see Chairman Grijalva, the son of farm workers, at the helm of this subcommittee and Congresswoman Solis and other Latinos serving in Congress to see just a glimpse of his imprint. The presence of Latinos in the highest levels of government, business, and other industries show just how much Cesar did to help break down barriers and inspire Latinos to seek the American dream.

We must preserve this legacy for future generations. That is why I support the idea of a federal study of lands associated with his life. Our government, just as it has done for own powerful leaders, should recognize Cesar with a lasting memorial, be it with land associated with the farm worker movement or Cesar's birthplace. There are no historical, geographical or cultural designations in the National Park Service honoring or recognizing the Latino community. The life of Cesar Chavez provides an outstanding opportunity to correct this injustice, by demonstrating and interpreting the history of agricultural labor in the west through the National Parks Service.

Cesar and other farm workers not only worked our land, but they loved it. It was their livelihood. That is why I think this resource study is so appropriate. It's important that we honor his legacy by preserving some piece of this land so that future generations can remember his extraordinary leadership.

Many are familiar with Cesar as the leader of the farm worker movement. However, some don't know that he was also a man of great faith. He studied the works of St. Francis and Ghandi. His belief in God empowered him and carried him through the difficult times. I prayed with Cesar and know that his faith in God helped lift millions of farm workers out of poverty and desperate conditions. His faith gave hope to farm workers and other facing economic hardship when they had none.

Since Cesar's death, I have traveled and prayed with farm workers all over the United States, including California, North Carolina, Florida, Washington, and Oregon. They revere Cesar and his memory. Like Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., is for the African American community, Cesar is an icon in the Latino community. It's time for us to honor him.

I support this bill and commend Congresswoman Solis for its introduction. I urge the Committee to support it and I look forward to any questions you may have for me.

Thank you.