

Testimony of

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Before the

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Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests and Public Lands

Legislative Hearing on H.R. 2100

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My name is Linda Otero and I am a Fort Mojave Tribal Council Member. I am also the Director of the Aha Makav Cultural Society. Since time immemorial we, the Mojave People, have inhabited the area along the Colorado River on lands that are now within the States of Arizona, California and Nevada. The Mojaves farmed in the receding annual floods and hunted, fished and gathered at other times of the year. We are the Aha Makav, the people of the river.

The rocky peak that towers over the shooting range this bill would make possible is known to Euroamericans as Boundary Cone Butte, but in our language it is *Avi Vasqui*, meaning “The Sharp Mountain.” Much of our spiritual esoteric knowledge about *Avi Vasqui* is held in high esteem by our elders; to make it public would at best dilute its power, and at worst be dangerous both for the elders and for those receiving the information. We can say, however, that *Avi Vasqui* is our time piece, measuring the span of our Tribe’s life; when *Avi Vasqui* is gone, the Mojave people will be gone as well. It plays many vital roles in our cultural lives, notably in our spiritual stories and song cycles. For instance, *Avi Vasqui* is an important landmark in the songs known as *aquak*, deer songs, tracing the path of the deer from the western to the eastern parts of our ancient homeland. *Avi Vasqui* was also the traditional home of one of our ancient chiefs, and our ancestors left signs of their ritual use of the area in the form of rock art and ceremonial circles. Ceremonial circles were and are regarded by our people as points of entry into other dimensions of reality.

Construction and operation of a shooting range will have a variety of direct and indirect visual and auditory effects on our spiritual relationships with *Avi Vasqui*, and with the overall practice of our traditional religions. For this reason, we have participated in a lengthy program of consultation with the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and others seeking alternative locations for the desired facility. We believe that a number of such locations exist, and that the bars BLM perceives to using them are spurious.

In the course of our consultation under Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act, BLM has acknowledged the cultural significance of *Avi Vasqui*, finding it to be eligible for the National Register of Historic Places as a traditional cultural property. BLM has acknowledged that construction and operation of the shooting range will adversely affect our cultural uses of *Avi Vasqui*. The Secretary of the Interior has received comments from the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation (attached) strongly recommending that BLM explore alternatives to the project as designed, because of the project's impacts on *Avi Vasqui* and our cultural values. Despite all this, BLM has astoundingly "determined" under the National Environmental Policy Act that the project will have no significant impact on the quality of the human environment. On the strength of this unsupportable conclusion, BLM has sought Congress' blessing for the land transfer that is the subject of H.R. 2100.

The Fort Mojave Indian Tribe is a federally recognized tribe, with which the United States government has a well-established trust relationship. This relationship requires the United States government to do what it can to protect the Tribe's interests. Appropriate respect for our spiritual beliefs practices is also mandated by the American Indian Religious Freedom Act and the Religious Freedom Restoration Act. Yet BLM proposes that constructing a shooting range at the foot of *Avi Vasqui*, and thus interfering with the exercise of our traditional religion, does not significantly impact the quality of the human environment. We find this deeply insulting.

And what keeps BLM from exploring alternative sites for the shooting range? The primary impediment to considering alternatives is the insistence by the proponent, the Arizona Fish and Game Department, that its facility be within fifteen miles and a ten minute drive from Bullhead City.

We respectfully suggest that Congress should not allow BLM to substantially burden the religious practices of a federally recognized Indian tribe for the convenience of shooters in the vicinity of Bullhead City. The Mojave people have a right to practice the religion of our ancestors; we ask that Congress not take it away. In the past, the U.S. government tried to make our grandparents give up their religion. Today we are holding on, but we continue to have to fight to protect our sacred space. No one would approve continuous gunfire around a church; how can the U.S. Government approve of it in our sacred space? Our feelings of reverence at *Avi Vasqui* are precious and connect us to the higher power. Others would not like it if we tribal folks started shooting off our guns around a church during the singing of hymns. That's sacrilegious. The same goes for others directing such acts toward us.

Please do not allow BLM to commit such sacrilege; please do not approve H.R. 2100.