

**Testimony on H.R. 2989, Save Our Sequoias Act**  
United States House of Representatives  
Committee on Natural Resources  
Longworth House Office Building  
Room 1234

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On behalf of the Tule River Tribe, I applaud Speaker Kevin McCarthy, Representative Scott Peters, and Chairman Bruce Westerman for working diligently across party lines and through all stakeholders, including the Tule River Tribe, to ensure that there are greater protections of the sacred Giant Sequoia Groves. We are thankful to Chairman Westerman for holding this hearing, and to Committee members for attending, as well as Committee and legislative staff who worked tirelessly to get us where we are today.

I am Shine Nieto, Vice-Chairman of the Tule River Tribal Council, the governing body of the Tule River Tribe. Our People are descendants of the Yokuts Indians, a large group of linguistically related people who occupied the San Joaquin Valley in California for thousands of years prior to contact with non-Indians.

Following the incorporation of California into the United States, several efforts were made, beginning in 1851, to relocate the Tule River Indians to a permanent homeland. The current Reservation was defined by three Executive Orders issued between 1873 and 1878 and today covers approximately 58,000 acres. The Tribe currently has 1,952 enrolled tribal members.

On September 9, 2021, the 97,528-acre Windy Fire was ignited by lightning on the Tule River Indian Reservation. The fire spread quickly - especially in areas where there was little to no previous prescribed preventative work known as "hazardous fuel reduction" to minimize fire severity. We took an "all hands-on deck" approach to help fight the fire alongside our neighbors and partners. With weather conditions changing constantly, we faced our worst nightmare: the fire spread throughout several sequoia groves and beyond. When the Windy Fire was finally contained and we assessed the damage, we knew that without the preventative work, we would have lost much more.

H.R. 2989 introduced last week - the "Save Our Sequoias Act" is a long overdue effort to empower resourceful experts and stewards to employ critical resiliency efforts to combat the very real threat of fire that plagues roughly 70 Sequoia groves as drought conditions increase. We recognize that there are currently few long-term drought solutions in place in the area to protect our forest and lands - so we must work together to save our sequoias. The Tule River Tribe is proud to support the passage of the Save the Sequoias Act.

As part of our advocacy efforts on behalf of this bill, the Tribe intends to present a resolution at the Mid-Year Conference of the National Congress of American Indians (NCAI) next month to garner support from all member tribes across the country. We will provide a copy of the resolution to the Committee upon adoption by NCAI.

We are genuinely committed to contribute our Traditional Ecological Knowledge of forest management practices that has kept the Giant Sequoias - true national treasures, in our presence for thousands of years. Our Traditional Ecological Knowledge is science and we appreciate that the legislation not only acknowledges this, but requires it. The holders of this knowledge is the Tule River Tribe.

A key aspect of our traditional forest management embraces the need for long-term, continual, caretaking of the Giant Sequoia Groves. The emergency corrective actions that have been taken since the recent fires have been helpful, but are short-term band aids. Once H.R. 2989 is enacted into law, long-term management approaches will be allowed to flourish.

The legislation forges a responsive coalition between the Tribe and its longstanding partners - federal, state and local land managers to bring our very best to the table as we work to advance the resiliency of the sequoia groves. The legislation paves the way to formalize a clear path forward on how we can combine our strengths to safeguard the sequoias.

The Tribe is proud to note that we are working hard to further contribute to protect the Sequoias. After over 50 years of negotiating, we are on the cusp of reaching a settlement of our Indian water rights with the United States. We hope to have legislation signed into law this session that will allow us to select and construct the best permanent drought solution for the South Tule River. This settlement will fund a reservoir that will supply a consistent water supply throughout the year, especially during droughts, to the Tule River reservation and downstream users. Better managed water resources are crucial to contain high severity wildfires. The combined effect of the tribe's water rights settlement legislation and the Save Our Sequoias Act will ensure the well-being of the Giant Sequoias for generations to come.

In July 2022, the Tribe hosted over 30 guests including the Assistant Secretary of the Interior, Indian Affairs and officials from various other federal and state agencies to tour the Tule River Indian Reservation and the Headwaters the South Fork of the Tule River located in the Sequoia National Monument. The caravan of guests made numerous stops and were able to experience a “boots on the ground” perspective of the gloomy effects of the unforgiving, fire ravaged area. We made sure that our guest likewise took time to appreciate the new growth, reforestation and recovery from previous fires.

We stopped to witness our crews hard at work to clean up the downed trees, treat the areas and plant over 180,000 new trees to rehabilitate damaged areas. Reforestation is no simple task. The burned areas do not exactly provide ideal conditions for young vulnerable seedlings. A lot of science, care and strategy is needed to ensure that those new trees will grow and survive. This work is done in hard-to-reach locations and in challenging weather conditions. Our crews include seasoned mentors and experts as well as numerous tribal youths from different tribal nations that will master these forest management practices and carry our Traditional Ecological Knowledge forward as it has been done since time immemorial. We know that we need more of this good work to achieve our collective goals.

We were able to show our guests that our traditional forest management practices worked. There was a very clear difference between those Giant Sequoia groves managed under our traditional practices and those that were not. The destruction of the Windy Fire could not reach past the lines of our traditional risk reduction treated areas and that saved many trees and our Reservation. We are grateful for these gifts of knowledge from our ancestors and appreciate that we are in an era where these gifts are valued the way that they should be - because we all will continue to benefit from them.

These ancient trees are not easily replaceable. They must be protected by all means possible. We continue to assess and recover from the Windy Fire and have learned much from it. We have been reminded that we need to collaborate to reduce fires. We need to share our knowledge and our resources. We need to respect and employ Traditional Ecological Knowledge. We need to do this together as co-stewards - and we need to do this now.

For these reasons, we urge the Congress to move this legislation forward. Thank you for this opportunity to provide comments in support of the Save Our Sequoias Act.