



PALA BAND OF MISSION INDIANS

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Testimony of Robert Smith, Chairman of the Pala Band of Mission Indians, before the United States Senate Committee on Indian Affairs, in support of H.R. 1975 (Rep. Darrell Issa), To take certain land located in San Diego County, California, into trust for the benefit of the Pala Band of Mission Indians, and for other purposes. *“Pala Band of Mission Indians Land Transfer Act of 2021”*

Chairman Schatz, Vice-Chairman Murkowski, and honorable members of the committee: My name is Robert Smith. I am the Chairman of the Pala Band of Mission Indians, located in San Diego County, California. I have been Pala’s elected Chairman since 1989, and I am proud to have represented the Cupeño and Luiseño people of Pala for these many years. It is an honor to sit before you today on behalf of the Pala people and ask for your support of House Resolution 1975, sponsored by Representative Darrell Issa.

For nearly 30 years, since before I became Pala’s chairman, we fought to stop a proposed landfill from being built in Gregory Canyon, immediately adjacent to the Pala Reservation. The landfill would have covered the slopes of one of our sacred mountains with garbage. This mountain, Chokla, is the home of one of the First People, the spirit Takwish. To prevent this desecration, Pala ended up buying approximately 700 acres of the proposed landfill property in 2016. This was a great victory not just for Pala, but for Indian peoples throughout Southern California who honor Takwish and his many homes.

Because this land is so important to us, we want to bring it into trust as a part of the Pala Reservation. It is part of the Luiseño traditional landscape, and it is land that has been occupied by Native peoples since time immemorial. The property is contiguous with the Pala Reservation, and in addition to being one of Takwish’s sacred homes, it is also the site of an ancestral village, rock art paintings, and artifacts, as well as culturally important plants and animals. While Pala has taken preliminary steps towards pursuing the fee to trust process through the Bureau of Indian Affairs, that process that can take several years, which is why we asked Congressman Issa to assist us via the legislative process. The sooner our sacred land is in trust, the sooner we can protect and preserve it.

Pala has no desire nor intention to develop this land in any way. Pala has a successful gaming operation already, so there is no need for more land for this purpose; and even if there were, the property is very steep and rugged and would be very difficult to develop. And even more important, as already stated: it is sacred to us. We will manage the land in its natural state, and provide the traditional stewardship to the sacred landscapes that Indian people have always maintained. Putting the land into trust and making it a part of the Pala Reservation will allow us to provide the protection that sacred Chokla deserves. Passing this bill is the most efficient and reasonable way for us to achieve this result.

What we are asking for is very simple. This land needs the protection that federal trust status provides. HR 1975 passed the House on a bipartisan vote of 397 to 25. I ask for your support so that the bill can advance to the Senate for passage and help us protect our sacred landscapes. Thank you.