

Testimony of Vice Chairman Reid Milanovich of the Agua Caliente Band of Cahuilla Indians  
In Support of S. 3273  
Senate Indian Affairs Committee

**S. 3273 - To take certain lands in California into trust for the benefit of the Agua Caliente  
Band of Cahuilla Indians, and for other purposes**

February 16, 2022  
2:30 pm

Good afternoon Chairman Schatz, Vice Chairman Murkowski, and distinguished members of the Committee. My name is Reid Milanovich, and I am the elected Vice Chairman of the Agua Caliente Band of Cahuilla Indians (Tribe). Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on behalf of the Tribe regarding S. 3273 – an act to take certain lands in California into trust for the benefit of the Agua Caliente Band of Cahuilla Indians and for other purposes.

First, I would like to thank Senators Padilla and Feinstein for sponsoring S. 3273. The bill is non-controversial legislation that authorizes the United States to take approximately 2,560 acres of land owned by the Tribe into trust for the Tribe and make those lands part of the Agua Caliente Indian Reservation. The Tribe strongly supports S. 3273, and we urge you to support this bill as well. On December 8, 2021 the House of Representatives passed H.R. 897 via suspension. H.R. 897 is the House counterpart to S. 3273, and we hope the Senate will consider acting soon to pass this important legislation that will allow the Agua Caliente Band of Cahuilla Indians to improve management of its wilderness areas.

To begin, I would like to share with you the history of these lands and their importance to the Tribe. The ancestors of my Tribe thrived in the desert and canyons of what is now known as the Coachella Valley. The Agua Caliente Indian Reservation was established in 1876. The Tribe – based in what has become the greater Palm Springs area – is a historic Indian tribe that is a steward for thousands of acres of our ancestral lands, spanning many city and county jurisdictions.

The nearby Santa Rosa and San Jacinto Mountains National Monument was established in 2000. The legislation establishing the Monument rightfully acknowledges the special cultural value of the mountains to the Tribe, including significant cultural sites, village sites, and

petroglyphs located there. The Tribe has worked hard to preserve the resources and values of our mountains and has made significant contributions to the cooperative management of these lands. The Tribe was a Member of the National Monument Advisory Committee, the National Monument Management Plan Steering Committee, and participated in the development of the National Monument Science Plan. Moreover, the Tribe has provided interpretive panels for the Monument and sponsors an annual festival for a non-profit which supports the Monument.

The legislation establishing the National Monument provided land-exchange authorization that allowed the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and the Tribe to exchange federally-owned property for Tribally-owned property. However, due to a drafting error the legislation did not expressly address the status of any land transferred to the Tribe through such an exchange. The authorizing language should have included text mandating that such exchanged lands be held in trust by the United States for the exclusive benefit of the Tribe. BLM and the Tribe worked for 17 years, from 2002 to 2019, to finalize a Binding Exchange Agreement (Exchange) for these 2,560 acres that are the subject of S. 3273. Through a consolidation of “checkerboard” land ownership in and around the Tribe’s Reservation, the Exchange will allow for more logical and consistent land management by the Tribe and the BLM. Having adjacent squares within the “checkerboard” allows Tribal management to be more efficient and provides for jurisdictional consistency within a more manageable geographic area. The Exchange lands now owned in fee status by the Tribe have longstanding cultural and natural resource value to the Cahuilla people. S. 3273 allows these Exchange Lands, now owned by the Tribe, to be taken into trust and made a part of the Tribe’s Reservation.

Taking these lands into trust as part of the Reservation has been thoroughly vetted in the surrounding community. Any concerns regarding public access have also been addressed, and there is no known opposition to this legislation. The Tribe has a long-recognized history of maintaining public access to trails within the Monument boundary and will continue this commitment to the Exchange lands in question. In fact, changing or curtailing public access to trails on the land is not feasible or practical, given its remote nature. Finally, S. 3273 does not allow these remote lands to be used for gaming purposes.

In conclusion, the lands at issue in S. 3273 are located within the exterior boundaries of the Reservation and have longstanding cultural and natural resources value to the Cahuilla people. Making these lands part of the Reservation will allow for more logical and consistent management by the Tribe. Thank you for your time and for the opportunity to testify in support of S. 3273. I am happy to answer any questions that you may have.