

Testimony of Chairwoman Regina Cuellar

Chairwoman, Shingle Springs Band of Miwok Indians

Before the Senate Committee on Indian Affairs

Hearing on S. 2735, A Bill to Take Certain Federal Land in the State of California into Trust for the Benefit of the Shingle Springs Band of Miwok Indians, and for Other Purposes

December 17, 2025

Good afternoon, Chairman, Vice Chairman, and Members of the Committee. Thank you for holding this hearing today and for the opportunity to testify.

My name is Regina Cuellar, and I am the Chairwoman of the Shingle Springs Band of Miwok Indians. I am accompanied today by our General Counsel, Mr. Nicholas Bryson.

I am here to testify in strong support of S. 2735, legislation that would transfer certain federal lands in El Dorado County, California, into trust for the Shingle Springs Band of Miwok Indians. This legislation is vital to our Tribe's future. It advances tribal self-determination, addresses an urgent housing crisis, and helps correct historic land-use decisions that continue to affect our community today.

Background of the Shingle Springs Band of Miwok Indians

The Shingle Springs Band of Miwok Indians is a federally recognized Tribe located near Placerville, California, in the western foothills of the Sierra Nevada. Over time, we have worked diligently to rebuild our land base, growing our trust lands from the original 160 acres to approximately 317 acres today.

Our Tribe is comprised of more than 582 Tribal citizens, approximately 140 of whom live on our reservation, with the remainder residing throughout the surrounding region. Despite a long history of upheaval and removal, we remain a close community that retains ties to our culture. Our tribe has endured dual displacement. In the mid-nineteenth century, we lived in two villages, Pusuune, located along the Sacramento River near what is now downtown Sacramento and Wollock, located near present-day Verona. In 1920, the United States purchased land for our Tribe (then referred to as the Sacramento-Verona Band of Homeless Indians) at our current location near Shingle Springs and informed our two communities that they would have to move

to this location. This new home near Shingle Springs was known as the “Verona Tract”, and was adjacent to a parcel known as the El Dorado Tract, which was land set aside for another Tribe.

As a result of decisions made by the United States and California State governments, our legal access to this land, the Verona Tract, was eliminated in the 1960’s, severely restricting our ability to provide housing, services, or economic opportunity for our people. It took more than four decades for the Tribe to regain meaningful legal access to our reservation—delaying development, fracturing our community, and undermining tribal self-determination.

Historic Access Challenges and Their Lasting Impacts

In the 1950s and 1960s, Caltrans planned and constructed Highway 50 through El Dorado County. Although assurances were made that access to our Rancheria would be preserved, CalTrans’ chosen highway alignment cut directly through the El Dorado Tract—our only legal access point to the Verona Tract.

Twenty-eight acres of the El Dorado Tract were sold for highway construction, and the remaining land eventually passed into private ownership. The Tribe was effectively landlocked. As a result, no tribal members lived on the reservation, and our lands were rendered unusable for decades.

Despite repeated efforts to secure rights-of-way through nearby subdivisions, including the Grassy Run Subdivision, these attempts were unsuccessful and often contentious. Ultimately, the Tribe resolved its access problem by constructing an off-ramp from Highway 50 directly to our reservation. While this finally restored access, the consequences of those earlier decisions continue to shape our land limitations today.

Once access was restored, we were finally able to build housing for our members, a tribal government center, a health care facility serving both our citizens and the surrounding community, and a gaming facility that supports essential tribal programs. Even so, our original land base remains far too small to meet our current needs, and our demands for housing are particularly acute.

The Urgent Need for Additional Trust Land

Our housing crisis is severe and ongoing. Today, we have 198 families on our housing waitlist. For nearly twenty years, the only way a tribal member could receive a home assignment was through inheritance, because no new homes were available. Only in the past year were we finally able to grant 20 new home assignments, but this barely begins to address the need.

We attempted to meet housing demand by purchasing homes in nearby subdivisions, but this approach has proven inefficient and costly, diverting tribal resources away from infrastructure and community services.

Ultimately, the solution we identified is located less than three miles from our Rancheria.

S. 2735 and the Indian Creek Ranch Property

S. 2735 would place into trust approximately 85.3 acres of Bureau of Land Management land and the 188.84-acre Indian Creek Ranch property, which the Tribe currently owns in fee.

The Indian Creek Ranch property is ideally suited to address our housing shortage. Located less than a five-minute drive from our tribal headquarters, the property was approved by El Dorado County in 2009 for a subdivision consisting of 75 residential lots and designated open space areas. Development stalled due to the housing market collapse, but the approvals remain in place, making this site a rare and timely opportunity for our Tribe.

Shortly after acquiring Indian Creek Ranch, we learned that an adjacent BLM parcel—originally designated decades ago for a U.S. Forest Service experiment station—had never been developed or maintained. The land was overgrown and posed a fire risk. The Tribe has since taken responsibility for clearing undergrowth and managing the property to reduce wildfire danger.

If transferred into trust, we have no plans to develop this BLM land. Instead, it would remain open space, potentially for recreational use, and integrated into the broader Indian Creek Ranch landscape. We would continue to maintain and manage it responsibly.

Additionally, there are two smaller nearby BLM parcels that are unused and unmanaged. S. 2735 would allow these parcels to be transferred as well, with no change in use, further supporting fire prevention and land stewardship.

Why Legislative Trust Transfer Is Necessary

While we have generally had positive experiences with the Bureau of Indian Affairs fee-to-trust process, the current backlog can cause significant delays. We currently have an application that has been pending for 10 years. Including the Indian Creek Ranch property in this legislation allows us to bypass those delays and begin addressing our housing crisis far sooner than would otherwise be possible.

At the request of our congressional delegation, we worked closely with El Dorado County to secure local support for the legislative trust transfer. The County submitted a formal letter of support, which has been provided to the Committee for the record.

An accompanying map dated April 23, 2025, identifies all parcels included in S. 2735.

Conclusion

S. 2735 represents a thoughtful, narrowly tailored solution to a long-standing problem created by historic federal and state actions. It allows the Shingle Springs Band of Miwok Indians to provide safe, affordable housing for our citizens, manage land responsibly, reduce wildfire risk, and plan for the future with dignity and self-determination.

Before concluding, I want to express our deep appreciation to the bill's sponsors, Senators Padilla and Schiff, and Congressman Tom McClintock in the House, and to the members of this Committee for their continued commitment to tribal sovereignty and land consolidation.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. I respectfully urge the Committee to advance S. 2735.