

Testimony of Chairman Jeff L. Grubbe of the Agua Caliente Band of Cahuilla Indians
In Support of H.R. 4059
House Natural Resources Subcommittee for Indigenous Peoples of the United States

H.R. 4059 - To take certain lands in California into trust for the benefit of the Agua Caliente Band of Cahuilla Indians, and for other purposes

February 5, 2020
2:00 pm

Good afternoon Chairman Gallego, Ranking Member Cook, and distinguished members of the Subcommittee. My name is Jeff Grubbe and I am the elected Chairman of the Agua Caliente Band of Cahuilla Indians . I have served as Chairman of my Tribe for 8 years, Vice-Chairman for 5 years and I have served as a member of my tribal council for a total of 14 years. Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on behalf of the Tribe regarding H.R. 4059 – 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 Congressman Raul Ruiz for sponsoring H.R. 4059. The bill should be 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 H.R. 4059.

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 an historic Indian tribe that is a steward to thousands of acres of our ancestral lands, spanning many city and county jurisdictions.

The 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. Also, 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 BLM and the Tribe to exchange federally owned property for Tribally owned property. However, 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 for these 2,560 acres that are the subject of H.R. 4059. The Exchange improves land management by the Tribe and the BLM through a consolidation of “checkerboard” land ownership in and around the Tribe’s Reservation to provide more logical and consistent management. The Exchange lands now owned in fee status by the Tribe have longstanding cultural and natural resource value to the Cahuilla people. H.R. 4059 allows these BLM 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 community. Any concerns regarding public access have also been addressed. Changing or curtailing public access to trails on the land is not feasible or practical, given its remote nature. The Tribe has a long, recognized history of maintaining public access to trails within the Monument boundary. Further, the lands acquired are located in a remote wilderness area within the Monument, and will be managed as conservation land similarly to how the land was previously managed by BLM. H.R. 4095 does not allow these lands to be used for gaming purposes.

In conclusion, the lands at issue in H.R. 4059 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 H.R. 4059. I am happy to answer any questions that you may have.