

Written Testimony of Floyd Mori
H.R.1931
Natural Resources
Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests, and Public Lands

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Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee, my name is Floyd Mori and I am happy to speak to you today regarding H.R.1931, the Japanese American Confinement Education Act. I am a former National Executive Director of the Japanese American Citizens League (JACL), one of the oldest and largest Asian American advocacy organizations in the Nation. The JACL and other organizations were part of a coalition that proposed the concept of H.R.1931 back in 2005. The initial legislation, the Japanese American Confinement Sites Program, passed through Congress with broad bi-partisan support. Congressman Bill Thomas was the principal author along with Congresswoman Doris Matsui. Senators Daniel Inouye and Robert Bennett were the principal authors in the Senate. It was signed into law by President George W. Bush in December 2006.

The WWII incarceration of 120,000 people of Japanese descent, mostly American citizens, has been an embarrassment for our country. The Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians completed a national study and found that the government of the United States committed a grave injustice with this incarceration. In fact, this summer will mark 40 years since the commission held public hearings where it heard directly from Japanese Americans about their personal experiences of incarceration. Many lost everything when they were given a few short weeks to prepare for this forced removal from the West coast of the United States. The Commission's findings were that this injustice was enacted because of wartime hysteria, government incompetence, and racial bigotry. As a result, legislation was passed that provided for an apology and reparations to the living survivors of these American concentration camps. This was one of the few actions of the Federal government for which Congress and the President issued an apology.

In spite of the efforts of many community organizations and educational institutions, there is little general knowledge of this shameful period of our Nation's history. The initial intent of the 2006 legislation was to provide various tools to help America understand this period of injustice so that such actions would never occur again to any other group in the United States. Over the past decade, 269 projects have been funded by this Act to educate and inform the public about this period and about the impact upon human life. Just last week, I was able to take a group of people to the Topaz Museum in Delta, Utah near where one of the ten main American concentration camps was located. It was an eye opener for them to learn from the Museum and then see the actual site. The original legislation provided significant matching funds in support of the construction of the Topaz Museum.

There were ten main camps and numerous other Federal incarceration facilities that imprisoned these citizens. A number of the sites have been designated National Monuments by Presidents of both parties. In some cases the National Parks Service operates facilities at these sites and in other cases private foundations have constructed learning centers. But more must be done. The matching funds provided by this program have incentivized more private entities to expand educational opportunities. Each camp has committees comprised of the family members of those who were incarcerated and they have developed programs to upgrade the educational aspects of the sites. The Federal matching funds from this program promote public/private partnerships to upgrade and expand these educational opportunities.

Other programs have allowed students to study that era of injustice and visit the actual camps to get a clear understanding and feeling of what these facilities were and how the incarcerated had to exist. In addition there are new educational programs at universities as well as at the various sites. But we need to broaden the scope of opportunities for people to learn more about this part of American history. Like the citizens I took to the Topaz Museum, a large majority of Americans have little understanding of the camps.

H.R.1931 will continue the work of the JACS program continuing to fund these projects, but it will also expand funding to further coordinate programming and promotion of education about the Japanese American experience. This additional funding will work with the existing JACS program and its projects, but with the potential to create stronger infrastructure for the community to ensure that education programs are sustainable and permanent for broader segments of the population and for future generations.

It has been said many times that if we do not learn from history, history will repeat itself. This is a part of history that should not be repeated and learning more about this shameful period will prevent many injustices to occur in the future. I urge you to support this concept and vote for the passage of H.R.1931 that has bi-partisan support.

Thank you very much for this opportunity to speak to you today.