

Testimony of Hilda L. Solis
H.R. 359 – Legislation to Honor and Recognize Latinos and the Environment
March 29, 2007

Chairman Grijalva and Ranking Member Bishop, thank you for allowing me to testify today in support of H.R. 359, legislation I introduced to honor and recognize Cesar Chavez. I appreciate your willingness to include this legislation in today's hearing and hope that with your support this legislation can be quickly considered by the full Natural Resources Committee and the U.S. House of Representatives.

I would like to thank my colleagues, Senators McCain and Salazar, who have championed this legislation in the Senate and the nearly 60 of my colleagues who have cosponsored this bill in the House. I would also like to thank friends and colleagues who are strong proponents and believers that identifying areas in the National Park Service important in the life of Cesar Chavez is a critical tool in the honor and recognition that both Cesar Chavez and Latinos deserve.

Cesar Estrada Chavez, a second-generation American, was born on March 31, 1927 in Yuma Arizona. Raised during the Great Depression, Chavez's family lost everything and wandered the southwestern United States with thousands of other farm worker families. Chavez eventually left the fields in 1952 and conducted voter registration drives and campaigns against racial and economic discrimination. In 1962, Chavez returned to help farm worker families and started the National Farmworkers Association. Today we know this organization as the United Farm Workers or the UFW.

Cesar Chavez changed the course of history for Latinos and farm workers. As a result of his actions, many have been empowered to fight for fair wages, health care coverage, pension benefits, housing improvements, pesticide and health regulations, and countless other protections for their health and well-being. These changes have meant considerable improvements for the life of the farm worker, three-fourths of which are Latino.

During his 66 years with us Chavez made a significant difference in the lives of those he touched, well beyond improvements for farm workers. Chavez was a humble man who knew the importance of hard work and sacrifice. His experience as a migrant farm worker taught him the value of community and family. Through his work to improve the lives of others, he taught the importance of non-violence, peace and patience as tools of change.

Chavez was a student of Mahatma Gandhi's non-violent philosophies. He believed that non-violence is the most powerful tool to achieve change, including social and economic justice and equality. Cesar Chavez believed that "non-violence is not inaction... (it) is hard work. It is the willingness to sacrifice. It is the patience to win." He taught that if we "have the capacity to endure, if we have the patience, things will change." Chavez also valued equity, responsibility, and faith.

Since I was a young Latina, Cesar Chavez has been my inspiration. While my parents strongly encouraged my siblings and I to work hard, get a good education, believe in oneself and respect the environment, society was not as supportive. Few Latinos and even fewer Latinas were

breaking glass ceilings. My parents could not afford to take my siblings and me on vacations, but nonetheless they made sure we enjoyed the outdoors and learned to value and appreciate what we have, and to work hard for that we did not have. Cesar Chavez is widely known for the phrase “Si Se Puede!” Some view this as a theme of the labor movement. But for those that know, as my family and I and so many others know, this phrase touches at the core of our being. Through Cesar Chavez’ experience and teachings, we know that it can be done.

Cesar Chavez’ work inspired me to find ways to help others and led me to civil service where I strive to do the best I can for those I represent. As a result of his beliefs, exhibited through his actions, I was moved to introduce this legislation and believe it is important that we preserve his history through our National Parks System.

National Park System units are important components of our nation’s historic, cultural, economic, recreation, and social identity, yet there is not a single unit of the National Park System dedicated to Latinos. Chavez strongly understood the importance of the land and the value of the environment in connection to ones health and economic stability. For many Latinos, this appreciation of the environment is cultural. Ninety-six percent of Latinos believe the environment should be an important priority for this country, and I strongly believe we should honor Latinos and Cesar Chavez through this special resource study.

It is my hope that one day Latino families have a place in the National Park Service where they can appreciate, honor and learn about Cesar Chavez’s work and beliefs, just as African American families can visit the Martin Luther King, Jr. historical site and the Selma-Montgomery trail.

Others support this goal also. The Congressional Hispanic Caucus, the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights, the National Hispanic Environmental Council, the National Parks Conservation Association, Southern California Edison, the Labor Council for Latin American Advancement, the Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund, the Earthday Network, the Latin American Foundation for Environmental Protection, Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa (Mayor of the City of Los Angeles), the National Association of Latino Elected and Appointed Officials (NALEO), the Cuban American National Committee, and the National Council of La Raza all support this legislation because they understand the importance of preserving the memory of Cesar Chavez.

Cesar Chavez’s work to protect health, the environment and workers’ rights paved the way for people like me to use my voice to fight for greater equality, to be courageous, and to bring justice to those who cannot achieve it themselves. It is my hope that through this legislation, future generations of young Latinos and Latinas can understand who Cesar Chavez was, why the work he did was important, and know that they too can be courageous and work toward the betterment of all mankind.

Chavez died in 1993 at the age of 66. 50,000 people attended his funeral. This is a tribute to the impact he had on people’s lives. By authorizing a study by the Department of Interior on the areas important in his life, we are studying the areas important in the lives of so many citizens who wandered the southwest during the great depression in search of work, the lives of so many

who believe in peaceful change, and the lives of so many who toil today in our fields as farm workers.

Thank you again Chairman Grijalva and Ranking Member Bishop for your time today. I hope we can all work together to honor both Latinos and the environment via passage of this legislation.

I yield back the balance of my time.