

House Committee on Natural Resources

Hearing on
The Cocopah Lands Act

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Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today on behalf of the Cocopah Indian Tribe to discuss "*The Cocopah Lands Act*" (H. R. 673). My name is Paul Soto, and I am a member of the Cocopah Indian Tribe. I have served intermittently for 34 years in various capacities in the Cocopah Tribal Government and have served 18 years as a Tribal Council member. I am currently serving as the Tribal Resource Planner and Acting Tribal Council Secretary.

In the early part of this century, the Cocopah Indian Tribe requested the service of the Fort Yuma Bureau of Indian Affairs Office in facilitating the process to convert tribally-owned fee land to trust land. Because the Fort Yuma Office was not equipped to handle such service, the tribe was directed to the Bureau of Indian Affairs Regional Office. However, the Regional Offices at that time directed the process back to the local Fort Yuma Office. Because this appeared to be the start of an on-going unsolvable dialogue, the Tribe was advised by the Fort Yuma Office to initiate a more direct approach. After five years of working with U.S. Representative Pastor and U.S. Representative Grijalva, this direct approach has brought me before you today.

In 2002, Representative Pastor-D first introduced "*The Cocopah Lands Act*" (H. R. 5000) during the 107th Congress. The bill was introduced on June 21, 2002 and sent to the House Committee on Natural Resources where it stayed without further development. At that time the second Port of Entry along the U.S.-Mexico Border near San Luis, Arizona, was introduced and became a priority for Representative Pastor and the Cocopah Indian Tribe.

Since the first introduction of this piece of legislation, Representative Grijalva-D replaced Representative Pastor as representative of our district. The Tribal Council requested the support of Representative Grijalva in sponsoring the re-introduction of "*The Cocopah Lands Act*," which he fully supported and took up efforts on behalf of the Tribe. Representative Grijalva introduced the bill in 2006 during the 109th Congress and again on January 24, 2007 during the 110th Congress.

The Tribe is requesting Congressional support to place five properties that are divided into seven individual parcels into trust to be included as part of the reservation. The five properties would increase the total size of the currently 6,500-acre reservation by 423

acres with the majority of the acreage being used as agricultural land by non-Indian farmers. Currently the Cocopah Reservation consists of three non-contiguous reservations, called the North, West and East Reservations. Our community members reside on all three reservations where much of that land is also leased as agricultural land.

As stated by Cocopah Tribal Chairwoman Sherry Cordova: “When we purchased the different parcels in the 80s and 90s, that's the only way we could secure the land to continue in our efforts to expand our much needed infrastructure for our people. If we are able to get these lands into trust, it would be a great thing for our tribe - to be able to make decisions, plan and build, knowing that we can now consider it as a part of the reservation. To have these lands in trust will give our tribal government the authority to govern in its true intent.”

In summary, I would like to thank you, Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee, for the opportunity to address you and speak on behalf of the Cocopah Indian Tribe. The Tribe graciously asks for your support in placing the additional 423 acres of tribally-owned land into trust for the betterment of our community and infrastructure, for enhanced economic opportunities for our future generations, and for the authority for our tribal government to govern to its true intent.