

TESTIMONY OF
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FOR THE EASTERN BAND OF CHEROKEE INDIANS
BEFORE THE SENATE COMMITTEE ON INDIAN AFFAIRS
HEARING ON
THE “EASTERN BAND OF CHEROKEE HISTORIC LANDS REACQUISITION ACT” (H.R. 2088)
November 15, 2021

Chairman Schatz and Vice Chairman Murkowski, thank you for the opportunity to provide this testimony on behalf of the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians on H.R. 2088, the “Eastern Band of Cherokee Historic Lands Reacquisition Act.” It is an honor for me to appear before this Committee.

Since before the coming of Europeans to this continent, the Cherokee have lived in the southeastern part of what is now the United States, in the states of North Carolina, Tennessee, South Carolina, Alabama, Georgia, Kentucky, and Virginia. In the time since this country was founded, the Cherokee have faced unending threats to our very existence. The Cherokee endured the Trail of Tears where more than 15,000 Cherokee Indians were forcibly removed by the U.S. Army from their ancestral homelands to the Indian Territory as part of the federal government’s American Indian Removal Policy. Thousands died. The Cherokee came to call the event *Nunahi-Duna-Dlo-Hilu-I* or Trail Where They Cried.

The Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians are the descendants of those Cherokees who resisted removal in the Great Smoky Mountains and escaped the Trail of Tears or who were able to return to their homeland in the Smoky Mountains after the Trail of Tears. The Eastern Band today is a Tribal Nation recognized by the United States as a sovereign with inherent rights of self-government, like the several states and foreign nations. We have a separate language and culture that makes us different than any group of people in the world. Leadership of the Cherokee and the Cherokee people themselves, with tenacity and determination, have fought to ensure that our way of life, our beliefs, and our sovereignty will survive. And we are still here today—and we continue to fight to protect our way of life, our sovereignty and our Cherokee identity from any who would try to wrongfully claim it as their own.

The “Eastern Band Cherokee Historic Lands Reacquisition Act” would return about 76 acres of land back to us, key historic sites that fell out of our ownership in tougher days. The legislation also would grant two permanent easements over TVA property to be held in trust for the Tribe for creating recreational trails between the sites. These properties commemorate and interpret historic people like Sequoyah, towns such as the historic Cherokee capital at Chota, and the culture of the Cherokee during the period from the early 1700s through 1840, and are also associated with and interpret the Trail of Tears. The properties are located in Monroe County, Tennessee, near the town of Vonore and are adjacent to Tellico Lake, the reservoir behind TVA’s Tellico Dam. This bill celebrates not only a time in Cherokee history when we lived in Tennessee but also the return of the Cherokee People—as a modern, living People, with a living culture and language, and traditions that have survived from ancient times—back to Tennessee.

Like our relationship with the United States, relations between the Cherokee People and the State of Tennessee have not always been congenial. Our historic relationship with Tennessee has been a troubled one, marked by Cherokee governance, conflict, broken promises, and accommodation for Cherokee survival. When President Andrew Jackson, who fought side-by-side with the Cherokees in the War of 1812, decided that we should not have rights to our lands in the Southeast, we moved our base of government from what is now Georgia right across the state line into what is now Red Clay, Tennessee. Soon after, the historic Cherokee Nation was forced to give up our lands. The Eastern Band Cherokees found refuge in our aboriginal territory in the state of North Carolina and the Great Smoky Mountains from forced removal, and we remain in a small portion of our original home lands. Through all of this, the Cherokee people have persevered and even prospered.

Our Tribe has been committed to improving these lands through the development of the Sequoyah Birthplace Museum. The Friends of Sequoyah, which provides sponsorship of the Museum, has also worked to install historic markers adjacent to the Tellico Reservoir and the Museum staff provides continuing maintenance of this property through the current TVA easement. We have had an ongoing partnership with the TVA since the construction of the Tellico Dam. It was the intention of the original agreement to place this land into trust status. Unfortunately, complications with the land into trust processes at the time of the agreement made an easement the better option for completing the Tellico project.

This legislation marks a new era of respect and appreciation between the Cherokee People, the United States, and the State of Tennessee. We welcome this new era and our Tribe is committed to continuing to work toward improving our respective sovereigns as friends and neighbors.

I believe these lands should be returned to our people for the continued protection of important Cherokee historic sites. Our Tribe is committed to improving the educational resources of the Sequoyah Birthplace Museum and to providing a means for economic development for the local community. We will continue our long-valued relationship with the TVA in order to maintain the integrity of the Tellico Reservoir and to preserve the resources of this area for our mutual benefit.

Thank you for the honor of the opportunity to testify in support of this important bill.