

**STATEMENT**  
**OF**  
**CHAIRMAN LESTER THOMPSON**  
**BEFORE THE**  
**COMMITTEE ON INDIAN AFFAIRS**  
**UNITED STATES SENATE**  
**JUNE 14, 2006**

Mr. Chairman, Members of the Committee, thank you very much for the opportunity to testify on the Tribal Parity Act, S. 374. I am Lester Thompson, the Chairman of the Crow Creek Sioux Tribe. It is an honor for me to be here with Chairman Mike Jandreau. Chairman Jandreau is the most senior Chairman in our State and in the Great Sioux Nation. I am the most junior Chairman in the Sioux Nation, having been elected Chairman in April. I took office, along with a new Tribal Council, in May 2006.

I also would like to thank Senator Thune for introducing the Tribal Parity Act and Senator Johnson for cosponsoring. This legislation before you is of extraordinary importance to our Tribe. I am delighted that it is the subject of my first appearance before Congress.

The members of the Crow Creek Sioux Tribe were relocated after Little Crow's War in Minnesota. People were transported on barges from Minnesota stopping at Santee and then we moved on to Crow Creek. Many lives were lost along the way. We are members of the Isanti and Ihanktowan divisions of the Great Sioux Nation. We speak Dakota and Nakota dialects. We have three districts on the reservation, and are a Treaty tribe.

The Crow Creek Sioux Tribe consists of 225,000 acres located in Central South Dakota. Our Western boundary is the Missouri River. In 1944, when the Congress enacted the Flood Control Act and authorized implementation of the Missouri River Basin Pick-Sloan Plan for water control, two of the dams, Fort Randall and Big Bend, flooded over 16,000 acres of our best and most productive bottom land. It was also the very land where a majority of our people lived. The cost to Crow Creek in human terms, and economically, was astronomical.

We lost:

- Our hospital;
- Housing units;
- Tribal Buildings and other structures;
- Schools;
- Businesses;
- Roads;
- Acres of waterbed and timberland, and domestic and ranch water systems;
- Food sources, such as fishing, hunting, and subsistence farming; and
- Ceremonial grounds and traditional medicines.

Our way of life was altered irreparably. Before the dams, the lifestyle was simple. The people worked in a community garden. In the evenings, the people would gather to share that day's catch of fish and the food gathered. They would meet to visit, pray, sing, and dance where the Bureau officials could not observe. The children attended boarding school within walking distance of their homes and family. The way of life, the social interactions, the camaraderie and sense of being one people – one Tribe, was destroyed by the environmental changes and forced relocation. The hospital and school were never replaced. The traditional medicine that grew solely in the waterbed and the Ceremonial Grounds are irreplaceable.

When the relocation took place, some purchased homes with the \$500 compensation received. Others received homes in low rent housing – a project constructed of fifty units in an area smaller than a city block.

The elders observed that this is when the change occurred. People started to watch each other, argue with each other, begrudge each other, and become disgruntled. With the loss of our school, the next option was the Immaculate Conception Boarding School, 13 miles away. The students were no longer able to walk to their homes and families on a daily basis, and those teaching were not people who believed in the heritage, culture, and customs of the students. Abuses that occurred in Catholic Boarding Schools are well documented historically, and I will not expand, except to say that the loss of our school negatively impacted our people on a much larger scale. This impact on the social development of our people has rippled down through generations.

Our Reservation is in Buffalo County, South Dakota. Buffalo County is the POOREST COUNTY IN AMERICA, and also has the highest cancer rate in the Nation. Many Elders believe that the building of the dam and disturbing the earth and the water flow released death in the air.

Chairman Jandreau has spoken eloquently regarding the desire to join the global market and seeking economic parity with the rest of America. I strongly agree and support those goals. But at Crow Creek, we must first achieve parity with Chamberlain, South Dakota, just twenty-five miles away. A small town of just 3,000 people, Chamberlain's unemployment rate is approximately the state average – 5 percent, while the rate at Crow Creek is over 80 percent.

For us to move forward, we must improve our infrastructure and create an environment that is conducive to human and economic progress. The Crow Creek Sioux Tribe Infrastructure Development Trust Fund Act enacted in 1996 (P.L. 104-223) awarded \$27.5 million to the Crow Creek Sioux Tribe. Of the \$27.5 million, the Tribe is allowed to utilize the interest. The Tribal Parity Act would greatly enhance the trust fund, thus

increasing our available monies and allowing us to leverage with the private sector. The first year of the trust fund, we received slightly over a million dollars. Due to fluctuating interest rates, the yield has now dwindled to slightly over \$700,000, and is not a set or guaranteed yearly amount. We have utilized the interest to do a number of things to improve the situation of our people, including the following:

- Purchase a small school with a gymnasium in the Big Bend District – the furthest outlying district. We are able to provide Kindergarten through 6<sup>th</sup> grade education to students in that area, preventing the necessity of an hour-long bus ride each way to and from school;
- Construct a Community Building in the Crow Creek District, providing a place to gather for socializing, celebrations, and funerals;
- Construct a Community Building in the Fort Thompson District, utilized for community events, program presentations, wakes, weddings, dance, meetings, and as a polling place;
- Set a higher education program to assist students in college;
- Purchase land to increase the land base; and
- Improve damaged roads and upgrade our water plant.

These initiatives just begin to scratch the surface. The legislation we are discussing today, S.374, is intended to supplement our existing trust fund. As you know, it passed the Senate three times in the 108<sup>th</sup> Congress, both as a stand-alone bill and as an amendment. All three times the measure died in the House. The Tribal Parity Act was again reported by this Committee on June 29<sup>th</sup>, 2006, but has yet to come before the Senate for consideration.

The Army Corps of Engineers has estimated that the Pick-Sloan Project's overall contribution to the U.S. economy averages \$1.27 billion annually. According to the Western Area Power Administration, the agency that administers the Pick-Sloan Project, receipts from the project in 2006 are likely to total \$119 million and the same every year after. The \$69 million dollar increase to the trust fund requested in S. 374 (as amended)

would bring the trust fund balance to \$96 million – less than one year’s receipts the government receives from the Pick-Sloan Project.

The expanded trust fund would enable the Crow Creek Sioux Tribe to make not just significant, but magnificent strides in growth and development. Economic development and environmental improvements would change the lives of our people, our children, and all future generations of Crow Creek Sioux. It would assist in putting Reservations on parallel ground, enabling us to compete economically, with Chamberlain and the rest of the United States, as opposed to remaining in our current state, operating below the standards of most Third World Countries.

The recent GAO report entitled “Analysis of the Crow Creek Sioux and Lower Brule Sioux Tribes’ Additional Compensation Claims” criticizes the Tribes for not using “a final asking price.” Mr. Chairman, there is not a Tribe or Tribal member that could possibly place a monetary value on the loss and detrimental impact the Pick-Sloan Project has had on our people. “Official” documents use terms such as “Lake Sharpe” or “Lake Francis Case” to identify the land overtaken by the Pick-Sloan Project. In the every-day language of the Tribal people, the land is called “taken area” or “taken land.” **Because it was taken.** The land taken was the richest portion of our reservation. There were no offers or deals made to sell the land, and no assessment done to determine the value of the land. Even if there had been an assessment, the medicinal plants grown on the land and the Ceremonial Grounds hold a higher, non-monetary value. The devastation this has wrought still remains today for all to see.

The Crow Creek Sioux Tribe is consulting with experts such as Dr. Mike Lawson to estimate a monetary value, but his name or expertise is not mentioned in the GAO report. The compensation listed for Crow Creek Sioux Tribe in the Tribal Parity Act is not based on the highest asking price, or based on the price for the Santee Sioux, the Lower Brule Sioux, or any other Tribe. Each Tribe is unique, but what binds us together is our sovereignty. We are asking for the ability to maintain our sovereignty.

A Christian group visited the Crow Creek Sioux Tribe, stating that they had read about the poverty on the Reservations and the fact that Crow Creek is in the poorest county in the America. After visiting, the group called the situation a **National Shame**. As Chairman of the Crow Creek Sioux Tribe, I want to see the deplorable statistics change. I do not want our situation to remain a national shame. We are not asking for charity, for a handout, or even for your pity. We are not even asking for a helping hand. We are simply asking for fair and just compensation.

For the men, women, and children of the Crow Creek and Lower Brule Sioux Tribes, there is nothing more important right now than moving forward with the Tribal Parity Act. The new Tribal Council, including myself as Chairman, understands the challenges that lie ahead. Our reason for running for office and our daily motivation is to improve the situation and make a positive difference for the people of the Crow Creek Sioux Tribe. The Tribal Parity Act is an essential step in our efforts to reverse the downward trend and move forward. We urge the Committee to file the report and bring S. 374 to the Senate Floor for consideration as soon as possible.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify before your Committee, and I will be happy to answer any questions you might have.