

**Statement of Leslie Weldon, Deputy Chief, National Forest System
USDA Forest Service
Before
The Senate Indian Affairs Committee
Concerning
The Leech Lake Band of Ojibwe Reservation Restoration Act
July 11, 2018, 2:30 p.m.**

Mr. Chairman, members of the Committee, thank you for inviting me to share the views of the United States Department of Agriculture on the Leech Lake Band of Ojibwe Reservation Restoration Act. The Administration has a number of concerns with this bill, but we are committed to working with the committee and the Leech Lake Band to find a working solution.

The Forest Service takes our responsibilities to the Leech Lake Band very seriously. In 2016, we began working with the Leech Lake Band to revise the Chippewa National Forest Plan for the benefit of the general public and Ojibwe lifeways. Since that time, the agency and the tribe have engaged in a series of consultations in order to work through their specific management priorities.

The Forest Service and Leech Lake Band of Ojibwe officials have also met several times to discuss the issue of land transfer and review the parcel list. An initial review of the land parcels was completed and some parcels are no longer owned by the Forest Service. In the course of that review the Forest Service identified concerns that would arise if these lands were transferred.

Fragmented ownership and boundaries resulting from the transfer could also lead to less access and fewer recreation opportunities on some areas of the national forest, impact planned and existing timber sale contracts, and affect more than 100 documented special use permits and rights of way for roads, utilities, railroads and cemeteries.

We at the USDA Forest Service take seriously our mandate to support rural communities while respecting the sovereignty of tribal governments. We look forward to continuing to work with this committee to ensure the prosperity of the Leech Lake Band and all of the people who rely on the Chippewa National Forest.

This concludes my testimony. I am happy to take your questions at this time.