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**PUEBLO OF ACOMA**  
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**Testimony of Robert MoQuino**  
**1<sup>st</sup> Lieutenant Governor, Pueblo of Acoma**

**before the**

**Senate Committee on Indian Affairs**  
**Legislative Hearing on S. 410, S. 1163, and S. 1928**

**November 18, 2015**

*"As we lose our ability to speak our Acoma language, we are losing the very essence of our traditional cultural values. All age groups need to demonstrate Acoma language use."*  
*–Acoma Antelope Clan Elders*

**Introduction**

Thank you Chairman Barrasso, Vice Chairman Tester, and Members of the Committee for allowing me to present this testimony on behalf of the Pueblo of Acoma. My name is Robert MoQuino, and I am the 1<sup>st</sup> Lieutenant Governor of the Pueblo of Acoma. I want to start by saying Guuwáátsíí. Guuwáátsíí is how we say hello in our Aak'um'e Dzeeni (Acoma Language), known as Keres. Guuwáátsíí is the word that we use to welcome someone into the Acoma world. So, I say Guuwáátsíí to each of you here today.

**The Importance of Indigenous Languages**

The Pueblo of Acoma is engaged in an ongoing battle to maintain, preserve, and revitalize our native language of Keres. As one scholar has described, "[I]anguage loss in the United States is steady and pronounced. At the beginning of the twentieth century most American Indian people spoke their native tongues as a first or second language. By the end of

the century, of some 300 original North American languages, just one-half were still spoken."<sup>1</sup> Today, experts predict that half of the over 6000 languages currently spoken in the world will disappear by the end of this century if nothing is done to prevent the extinction of languages worldwide.<sup>2</sup>

Acoma is fighting against the tide of language loss because, as the elders of our Antelope Clan have stated: "As we lose our ability to speak our Acoma language, we are losing the very essence of our traditional cultural values. All age groups need to demonstrate Acoma language use." For the Acoma people, our language is inextricably intertwined with our cultural survival. At the beginning of time immemorial, Aak'um'e Dzeenii (Acoma Language) was gifted to us by Aak'um'e Hanu (Acoma People) by our two spiritual deities (Spiritual Mothers) Iatiku and Tsi'tiwwshti naak'u. Along with Aak'um'e Dzeenii, they gifted us the core values of family, culture, and tradition. Aak'um'e Dzeenii is essential for sustaining the culture and values of the people. Our existence and identity—and those of future generations—depends upon the continuation of our language.

Language is the conduit by which our culture is transmitted. It is through our native language that we pass on to the next generations the Acoma world view and our traditional values. For instance, without Keres one cannot fully understand our emergence story, which explains that we were destined for Sky City. Without this language our young people cannot fully participate in their religious and cultural ceremonies. Every year, for example, our Governor gives an address at Sky City that is all in Keres, and without knowledge of the language our people cannot understand and participate in this important part of our culture and our civic life.

We are struggling to keep our language alive because without day-to-day use, our people are becoming less and less fluent in Keres. Our elders—invaluable language resources for our community—are passing on, taking with them the knowledge of generations. The need to pass Keres on to our young people has never been more urgent. We ask for your full support in helping us maintain our identity as Acoma people by helping us keep our language alive.

### **Acoma Language Programs and Initiatives**

Our Aak'um'e Dzeeni (Acoma Language) Program Coordinator, Gregg Shutiva has stated that many Acoma Tribal citizens say that we are losing our language, but his response to that is that "we have not forgotten our language, we just do not use it." Our Acoma Language Retention Program ("ALRP"), therefore, seeks to revitalize and maintain the Acoma Keres language in our community, and it has been in operation for over a decade.

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Wilkinson, *Blood Struggle: The Rise of Modern Indian Nations* 360 (2005).

<sup>2</sup> See *Endangered Languages*, UNESCO.ORG, <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/culture/themes/endangered-languages/>.

The ALRP focuses on teaching the Keres language to children through Keres language instruction in the local schools, including Laguna–Acoma Jr. Sr. High School, Cubero Elementary School, St. Joseph Mission School, and Sky City Community School. However, we sometimes have difficulty getting our Keres language teachers certified by the State of New Mexico. The experts and teachers in our Keres language do not always have the credentials required by the State. However, we believe that our community is best prepared to select persons qualified to teach our language and pass on our cultural knowledge.

The ALRP has also developed an Acoma Oral History Curriculum and various arts and crafts programs for youth as well as adults. Additionally, the ALRP offers three-week Keres language immersion camps in the summer for children ages 5–16. ALRP activities depend on Tribal appropriations as well as federal, state, and private grants.

Some of our grant-funded activities have had to be discontinued because of a lack of federal funding. For instance, Acoma received a \$271,587 language preservation and maintenance grant from 2011–2014 from the Administration for Native Americans ("ANA") – an Esther Martinez grant. This grant allowed Acoma to develop a "language nest" for our littlest ones—ages birth through 5. Seeing these youngest children going to their language nest and hearing them learn to speak their native language to their elders brought joy to so many in our community. However, this program had to be discontinued after funding ran out.

We recently applied for a renewal of the Esther Martinez grant to sustain our language preservation and maintenance efforts, but our application was denied. The denial letter stated that "[d]ue to the number of applications received and the demand for project dollars, ANA could not fund all eligible applicants." Our application was therefore "not selected for funding due to [ANA's] limited resources."

Currently, the ALRP is focused on building a Home Study Program. This program focuses on bringing the Keres language to the people in their own environments, where multiple generations and individuals with various levels of proficiency may all learn together. Our Home Study Program was launched in FY 2014 and served 27 entities—households as well as the staff of various Tribal programs. So far, this program has been very popular and is working to increase day-to-day Keres use, but additional funds are needed to sustain Acoma's innovative approaches to language revitalization.

### **Support for S. 410, S. 1163, and S. 1928**

The Pueblo of Acoma supports the Native language provisions of S. 410, S. 1163, and S. 1928 as important steps toward assisting Tribal communities in their efforts to preserve, maintain, and revitalize their Native languages. In particular, S. 1163 would amend the Native American Programs Act of 1974 to reauthorize the ANA grant program through FY 2020. This reauthorization is critical, as there are many Native language programs in need of support. As the ANA's letter declining Acoma's application for Esther Martinez funding indicated, resources

are extremely limited such that not all eligible applicants are able to receive these vital resources. Additionally, Acoma supports S. 1163's revisions to the grant program, which would lower the number of children required to form language nests and language survival schools and extend the duration of grants to up to five years. This added flexibility is important to enable Tribes to design programs that best fit their needs.

Acoma also supports the expansion of programs to support Native language and culture in S. 410. The bill's exemption of Native language teachers from Elementary and Secondary Education Act ("ESEA") qualification requirements and its mandate that states develop a licensure or certification process for Native language teachers. As stated above, Acoma has had difficulty getting Native language teachers certified in New Mexico public schools. Tribal standards and processes for selecting the individuals entrusted with passing on our Native languages—and with them, important aspects of our cultures and traditions—should be respected by states. S. 410 would also amend the Native American Programs Act of 1974 to reauthorize appropriations for grants through 2019. This reauthorization is critical to providing Tribal language programs much-needed support.

Finally, Acoma supports S. 1928's provisions to support and train Native language educators. The bill would cancel loans for Native language immersion teachers and create a Native Language Teacher Training Program. As our communities are losing more and more fluent speakers as elders pass on, it becomes increasingly important that younger generations dedicate themselves to becoming fluent in their Native languages and becoming equipped to pass on these languages to others.

### **Conclusion**

In closing, I would like to say Dá'wá'éh, which means thank you. Thank you for this opportunity to provide testimony about our Aak'um'e Dzeeni, our Acoma language. And thank you for taking up these important bills to help us in our struggle against language loss. These legislative efforts are important not just to Acoma, but to Tribal people throughout the United States.