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117th CONGRESS

S. 4439

the Katimiin and Aameekyaaraam Sacred Lands Act

A bill to take certain Federal land located in Siskiyou County, California, and Humboldt County, California, into trust for the benefit of the Karuk Tribe, and for other purposes.

Written Testimony of Chairman Russell A. Attebery
Before the
Senate Committee on Indian Affairs

July 20, 2022

PURPOSE

The purpose of S. 4439, the Katimiin and Aameekyaaraam Sacred Lands Act, is to provide for the transfer of approximately 1,031 acres of Federal land into trust for the benefit of the Karuk Tribe. This land is our “Center of the World”, a special and sacred place where Karuk people have lived, fished, prayed and fixed the world since time began, and continue those same traditions today. By placing this land into trust, this bill will forever protect and preserve our ability to exercise our religious beliefs in the same manner as our ancestors have done since the beginning of time.

BACKGROUND AND NEED

Ancestral Territory – The traditional ancestral homeland of the Karuk Tribe encompasses a vast territory of over 1 million acres in the Mid-Klamath region of California. The seizing of these lands by the United States was done without the free prior and informed consent of the Karuk Tribe, nor did the establishment of the National Forest System specify its direct effects on the Karuk people. Natural resource utilization and management remains a vital part of Karuk culture. The territory includes two counties, two Congressional Districts and 95% of our ancestral territory is currently being managed by the United States Forest Service. As a result, the Tribe struggles to ensure that traditional management practices and Karuk cultural values are integrated into management decisions. The harvest of salmon, acorns, deer, elk, mushrooms and other natural products still serve as subsistence for many tribal families while the act of hunting, gathering, managing and processing these natural food products help define the Karuk Tribe’s cultural identity.

Cultural Significance - The Karuk Tribe’s historic and present-day government to government relations with the United States is due in large part to ceremonial leaders conducting ceremonies and rites at Katimiin, Aameekyaaraam and several other ceremonial areas. These areas are integral to understanding Karuk cosmology and creation as well as the perpetuation of Karuk customs, language and culture. Enactment of this legislation will ensure Tribal ceremonial leaders and traditional practitioners will have unfettered access to these lands for

inter-generational learning and traditional and customary uses in perpetuity. Some aspects of our ceremonies require isolation from any kind of human interaction, in recent years we have seen a dramatic increase in disturbances from airplanes, helicopters and recreational users. S. 4439 will provide our people protection from these types of negative and disrespectful occurrences. This legislation will also provide the Karuk Tribe what other Americans have long had the right to do, which is freely exercise our religion on land that is sacred to us without the fear of outside disturbances and interruptions.

SUMMARY OF MAJOR PROVISIONS

S. 4439, as introduced, is an amended version of HR 6032 introduced into the House of Representatives on November 16th, 2021 by Congressman Jared Huffman. The Tribe has diligently conducted additional outreach with the Administration and the Senate version has incorporated those revisions: (1.) The legislation provides for the transfer of approximately 1,031 acres to the Karuk Tribe, the exact acreage and boundaries will be determined by a land survey completed within 180 days of enactment. (2.) The components of the National Wild and Scenic Rivers System that flows through this land will continue to be managed by the Chief of the Forest Service and the Tribe will enter into a Memorandum of Understanding with the Chief to ensure protection and enhancement of Wild and Scenic components are done in cooperation with the Tribe.

This legislation when enacted will not affect valid existing rights, these may include land held in fee, Special Use Permits, Easements and other similar rights held by individuals or businesses before the transfer of these lands is realized.

OUTREACH

The Karuk Tribe has conducted extensive outreach to cultural and ceremonial leaders, local Tribes, local and State governments, private landowners, the Administration and Congress to educate and gather support for this sacred lands bill. The level of support the Tribe has received has been both humbling and reassuring: this type of simple, straightforward legislation returning lands that are without question sacred to Tribes is of utmost importance. The Tribe has received no opposition that we are aware of in regards to HR 6032 or S. 4439. The Karuk Tribal Council has elevated this effort as our highest priority and will commit to further engagement as needed to educate and inform Congress and the Administration on any aspect of this legislation.