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As Fire engulfs Southeast AZ, Lawmakers are Informed of the Urgency to Support the Save Oak Flat Act

Due to exemptions from environmental law, the FEIS will not prevent destruction of land and water resources.

By Molly Peters

Members of the Apache Stronghold visited Washington, DC, last week to meet with top congressional staffers and union representatives regarding the Save Oak Flat Act (H.R. 1884, introduced by Rep. Raul Grijalva), which is currently awaiting a full floor vote in the House of Representatives before it can progress in the Senate. There is no date currently set to put the bill to a vote, but once there is sufficient support confirmed in the House, a vote will likely occur within the coming months.

Among others, the Apache Stronghold met with staff from the offices of Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer (D-NY), Sen. Mark Kelly (D-AZ), Sen. Krysten Sinema (D-AZ), Sen. Bernie Sanders (I-VT), Rep. Raul Grijalva (D-AZ), Rep. John Garamendi (D-CA), and Rep.



Members of the Apache Stronghold outside Sen. Mark Kelly's office, following a meeting with Katie Campbell, Legislative Director for Sen. Kelly. *Photo by Molly Peters*



Camila Thorndike, Energy & Environmental Policy Legislative Assistant for Sen. Bernie Sanders, speaks with the Apache Stronghold near the US Capitol. *Photo by Molly Peters*

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Steny Hoyer (D-MD). Rep. Hoyer is the House Majority Leader, and as such, it is his responsibility to decide when to hold a vote on the bill. During the meetings with the Teamsters Union and Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer's staff, the Apache Stronghold was joined by their longtime ally, Rev. John Mendez, who spoke powerfully about the clear religious discrimination endured by the Apache people in the fight to protect Oak Flat. In his comments, he focused on the particular cruelty of the US government's actions against the Apache religion and cultural practices. Rev. Mendez was clear in his message about the effects if Oak Flat is transferred to Resolution Copper, saying, "You're talking about discrimination? It's more than discrimination. It's more like elimination."

In addition to the issue of religious discrimination, the environmental concerns were emphasized in the meetings throughout the week. Some members of Congress appear to be waiting until the new Final Environmental Impact Statement (FEIS) is released to take a position on whether or not to support the legislative effort to save Oak Flat, but by then, it will already be too late. Their inaction will become action by default. The way the Southeast Arizona Land Exchange was written allows Resolution Copper to avoid accountability for any and all environmental destruction once the land becomes theirs, when they were granted exemptions from federal environmental law. Even if the FEIS details the devastation this proposed mine will cause, by that point, it won't matter. Once the FEIS is published, the transfer is legally mandated to take place within 60 days.

Dr. Wendsler Nosie Sr. said, "I understand the leaders are watching what's coming up with the FEIS, but what everyone seems not to understand is, once it's published, the land transfer is confirmed. It's my hope that all Arizonans will call on their elected leaders to support the Save Oak Flat Act, regardless of their political be-

liefs, because for the survival of southern Arizona, we need them to make that decision as leaders now instead of waiting for the FEIS."

On June 16, the Stronghold members saw a statement from John Truett, Arizona's state fire management officer, saying that due to Arizona's severe drought, there isn't enough water in the lakes and reservoirs to fight the multiple massive wildfires currently ravaging the state. Given the massive amounts of water needed for mining, the scarcity of this vital resource is highly relevant when it comes to the importance of the Save Oak Flat Act. When there is not enough water to fight the fires, there cannot be enough to support another mine in the area. On top of that, Resolution Copper's dewatering activity in the Oak Flat area is already drying up the land and vegetation more than ever before. When that is added to the current drought, the wildfire conditions are exacerbated further. In order to sustain life in Arizona for current and future generations, protecting the land and water from further issues is necessary.

Resolution Copper states that the mine will create jobs in the community, but the reality is that many of the jobs will be contract work, not given to locals, and once the copper ore is extracted, it will be shipped to China via Mexico to be smelted, since no facilities exist in the US to do the job. That means the mine would be giving America's precious natural resources to China, with politicians allowing a foreign mining company to make all the profits, while contaminating the land and water here. The mine would only last a few decades, then those jobs will disappear, but the devastation left in the mine's wake would be here for eternity, without possibility for recovery.

The Apache Stronghold will return to Washington DC in the coming weeks for additional meetings with the country's elected officials, as well as outreach with national religious leaders, to discuss the importance of the Save Oak Flat Act, to preserve the environment and protect the religious rights of Apaches and all people.



Members of the Apache Stronghold speak with Rev. John Mendez in Washington, DC.



Rev. John Mendez speaks with Sen. Chuck Schumer's staff about the religious discrimination faced by the Apache people.



Andy Banks, Deputy Director of Campaigns for the Teamsters Union, and Bryntee Laurette of the Center for Biological Diversity at a meeting with members of the Apache Stronghold in Washington DC.



Naelyn Pike, a member of the Apache Stronghold and Secretary for Chairman Terry Rambler, speaks with Sen. Chuck Schumer's staff via zoom.



Members of the Apache Stronghold speak with congressional staff about the Save Oak Flat Act in a meeting at the National Indian Gaming Association.



Dr. Wendsler Nosie Sr. in a meeting in Washington, DC.

Pictured Bottom Left:
Dr. Wendsler Nosie Sr. and Rev. John Mendez, at the Wall of Sovereignty at the National Indian Gaming Association in Washington, DC.



Members of the Apache Stronghold and Mapetsi Policy Group meet with Chris Phelan, Policy Advisor for Sen. Kyrsten Sinema, via Zoom near the US Capitol. L to R: Vernelda Grant, Naelyn Pike, Gordon Kenny, John Harte, Dr. Wendsler Nosie Sr, and Vanessa Nosie.



The Apache Stronghold at the National Democratic Club for a lunch meeting



Members of the Apache Stronghold speak with congressional staffers via zoom at the National Indian Gaming Association in Washington, DC.



Members of the Apache Stronghold (L to R): Vernelda Grant, the Tribal Historical Preservation Officer and Archaeologist for the San Carlos Apache tribe, Dr. Wendsler Nosie Sr. former Tribal Chairman, and Naelyn Pike, secretary for Chairman Terry Rambler.



Members of the Apache Stronghold approach the US Capitol for meetings with Senate staff.