

APACHE STRONGHOLD

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NOTRE DAME RELIGIOUS LIBERTY LAW CLINIC JOINS OAK FLAT LAWSUIT TO PROTECT APACHE RELIGIOUS RIGHTS

PHOENIX, *Ariz.* – The Notre Dame Law School Religious Liberty Initiative Clinic filed an amicus or "Friend of the Court" [legal brief](#) this afternoon in Federal Court in support of Apache Stronghold's efforts to prevent the destruction of Oak Flat or *Chi'chil Bildagoteel* and the resulting devastating impact on Apache religion. Notre Dame's filing highlights the fact that the U.S. Government is trying to force the Apache to give up their religion at Oak Flat while it protects the religious rights of non-Indians elsewhere. This violates Apache constitutional rights. The filing also notes that the U.S. Government has a trust responsibility to protect sacred sites, not to destroy them.

Notre Dame's filing is made on behalf of White Mountain Apache Tribe Cultural Resource Director and Tribal Elder Ramon Riley, the Morning Star Institute, and the Multicultural Initiative for Community Advancement Group ("MICA"). The Morning Star Institute promotes sacred land claims and protection for traditional cultural rights. MICA (<https://micagroup.org/>) is a non-profit organization that helps Tribal communities preserve their language and culture.

"We are so grateful and honored that Notre Dame is helping the Apache in our time of greatest need," said, Apache Stronghold leader and former San Carlos Apache Tribal Chairman Dr. Wendsler Nosie, Sr. "The government is saying that destruction of *Chi'chil Bildagoteel* will not be a serious problem for us when its destruction will force us to stop practicing our religion."

In last Wednesday's emotional [hearing](#) in front U.S. District Court Judge Steven Logan at the Federal Court in Phoenix, Apache Stronghold member Naelyn Pike related the connection of a young Apache woman to Oak Flat, "so when we talk about Oak Flat being gone, it's cutting a tie to my sister's life and to all of the girls' past, present, who have their Sunrise Ceremony there. The connection to *Chi'chil Bildagoteel* is gone...if we don't have that connection... then we are dead inside. We can't call ourselves Apache."

"I want to be clear that this is not an issue of "access" and that neither *Chi'chil Bildagoteel*, the powers resident there, nor our religious activities that pray to and through these powers can be 'relocated,'" said Director Ramon Riley. "It is painful to experience the continued dismissal ... of our rights to exercise our religion at a place uniquely endowed with holiness and medicine. The lands proposed for destruction by the proposed mine cannot be replaced."

The Religious Liberty Initiative Clinic seeks to protect religious freedom. Its founding news release states, "Religious liberty is the first freedom articulated in the U.S. Bill of Rights, and Pope Francis has said ... "all are called to be vigilant ... to preserve and defend that freedom from everything that would threaten or compromise it." News of the Clinic's opening can be found at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4s-KlLcliu4>.

Judge Logan has promised to rule on February 12, 2021 whether he will stop Oak Flat from being given away to Rio Tinto/Resolution Copper before a trial.

More information at: <http://apache-stronghold.com/about-us.html>

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