



STATEMENT OF SUPPORT

SUBCOMMITTEE ON NATIONAL PARKS, FORESTS, AND PUBLIC LANDS LEGISLATIVE HEARING ON H.R. 8108, 8109, AND 8719

THE RESPECT GREAT BEND COALITION | SEPTEMBER 14, 2022

Chair Neguse and distinguished Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to provide this statement of support. The Respect Great Bend Coalition is unified in its support of the *Great Bend of the Gila Conservation Act*, the *Advancing Tribal Parity on Public Land Act*, and the *Tribal Cultural Areas Protection Act*. We thank Congressman Grijalva and Senator Heinrich for their leadership in the movement toward Tribal co-management of public lands.

The Respect Great Bend Coalition recognizes that the establishment of National Parks, Conservation Areas, Monuments, and Wilderness Areas has displaced Indigenous Peoples from their traditional lands and disrupted their essential connections to those lands. In addition, various land designations have seldom prioritized Indigenous Peoples' participation in the creation and implementation of Resource Management Plans.

We also acknowledge the Great Bend of the Gila as the ancestral and spiritual homelands of the Ak-Chin Indian Community, Cocopah Indian Tribe, Colorado River Indian Tribes, Fort McDowell Yavapai Nation, Fort Mojave Indian Tribe, Fort Yuma Quechan Indian Tribe, Gila River Indian Community, Hopi Tribe, Pueblo of Zuni, Salt River Pima-Maricopa Indian Community, Tohono O'odham Nation, Yavapai-Apache Nation, and the Yavapai-Prescott Indian Tribe.

Although the protection of public lands across America is important, even more important is the manner in which these places are protected. As stated in the *Bridges to a New Era* report,

“The history, law, and policy of the United States’ relationships with both Indian tribes and the public lands are intimately intertwined and historically co-dependent. But for the removal and exclusion of tribes from large swaths of their traditional territories, there would be no public lands. While the federal policies ushered in by the momentous events of 1970 largely treat

these policy arenas as separate, the future of public lands management will be defined by the law's ability to justly recognize and reconcile the historical and legal context of indigenous dispossession through a new era of reform that thoughtfully and meaningfully restores tribal management to federal public lands.”¹

We see all three of these Acts as milestones in the journey toward ensuring that Tribes have a greater role in the management of public lands across the United States, and specifically in the Great Bend of the Gila. Because these lands are carved out of Indigenous Peoples' homelands, Tribes have and deserve the perpetual right to access and manage these lands. Furthermore, as the original caretakers of these places, Tribal Nations and their citizens have the knowledge necessary to manage public lands for the benefit of all people and future generations. It is time to reform legislation to usher in a new era in which Tribes have a real place at the table and stand on equal footing with municipal, state, and federal governments regarding the management of public lands, nearly all of which are home to Tribal cultural sites or comprise entire cultural landscapes that were and are home to Indigenous Peoples. The Great Bend of the Gila is just such a place, and its protection includes legislation ensuring that the 13 Tribes identified in this statement have the opportunity to manage it in the manner they see fit.

The *Great Bend of the Gila Conservation Act* specifically seeks to protect the Great Bend of the Gila—a river valley and surrounding desert region between Phoenix and Yuma, Arizona. Tribes, local communities, businesses, recreationists, conservationists, and heritage preservationists celebrated the bill's introduction and have been working for greater permanent protections for this region's history, heritage, and natural values for decades. Much of the Southwest's history, heritage, and natural and geological values are exemplified in the Great Bend of the Gila. Shaped by natural forces over millions of years, this volcanic landscape is part of the Sonoran Desert, which ranks first in biodiversity among the deserts of North America. The region serves as a critically important travel corridor for animals like bighorn sheep, Sonoran desert tortoise, mule deer, Le Conte's thrasher, javelina, and the endangered Sonoran pronghorn.

H.R. 8719 recognizes the importance of the cultural, historical, spiritual, and ancestral ties that at least 13 federally recognized Tribal nations maintain to the region and establishes a process for management consultation with the creation of a Tribal commission. Further, the National Conservation Areas and Wilderness Areas created by H.R. 8719 are essential to ensuring the continued thriving of wildlife and plant species in the unique and iconic Sonoran Desert. This legislation will also guarantee access for responsible recreation through future generations, including more equitable opportunities for people of all cultures and backgrounds to benefit from this enduring yet sensitive landscape.

¹ Monte Mills & Martin Nie, *Bridges to a New Era; A Report on the Past, Present, and Potential Future of Tribal Co-Management on Federal Public Lands*, [2] (Missoula, MT: Margery Hunter Brown Indian Law Clinic/Bolle Center for People and Forests, University of Montana, 2020).

ABOUT THE RESPECT GREAT BEND COALITION

The Respect Great Bend Coalition is united in efforts to permanently protect the natural and cultural landscapes of the Great Bend of the Gila, a stretch of river valley and surrounding Sonoran Desert between the cities of Phoenix and Yuma, Arizona. The public lands of the Great Bend of the Gila must be better protected in a way that recognizes their importance to Tribes, their cultural and historical values, and the role of these lands in providing habitat for plants and animals, combating climate change, and redressing water scarcity. Coalition members include Archaeology Southwest, Arizona Faith Network, Chispa Arizona, GreenLatinos, Sierra Club (Grand Canyon Chapter), and The Wilderness Society. Learn more at respectgreatbend.org.