

CONGRESSMAN LES AuCOIN
TESTIMONY ON THE SILETZ RESERVATION (HR 7267)
COMMITTEE ON THE INTERIOR
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
MAY 29, 1980

Mr. Chairman, this Committee meets today to consider legislation to establish in Oregon a reservation for the Confederated Tribes of Siletz. This is an historic step. I want to thank the Committee for scheduling this hearing and, in particular, I want to thank you, Mr. Weaver, for presiding over the committee at this time.

The bill to establish a reservation for the Siletz culminates five years of work on my part and theirs to help the Siletz meet a host of economic and social problems that have plagued them for many years. I sponsored the Siletz Restoration Act of 1977 along with Senator Hatfield in the last Congress. This act restored official tribal status to the Siletz and qualified tribal members for federal health, education and employment programs. It also set in motion a planning process leading to a recommendation to Congress for a reservation. That recommendation was sent to the Hill last November and is embodied in the legislation now before this Committee, HR 7267.

It's impossible to overstate the importance of a reservation to the Siletz. The tribe's economic needs are well documented by the Department of Interior. Let me run through some of them for you. Over a third of Siletz families have incomes below the U.S. poverty level. The median household income is less than half the Oregon state average. In Lincoln County alone, Indians have a 44 percent unemployment rate. Twenty percent are on public assistance. Tribal members suffer from severe health problems and nutritional deficiencies. Substandard water and septic facilities are common, and more than a third of the Siletz families live in substandard housing. Nearly half of the adult tribal members have not completed high school.

The federal assistance programs that have come with restoration of tribal status have helped to address these problems. But the proposed reservation will provide the opportunity to move beyond restoration so that the tribe can work toward economic self-sufficiency -- much as the Warm Springs Tribe in Oregon has done in a remarkable success story. Indeed, Mr. Chairman, economic self-sufficiency is the critical reason why this legislation is needed and why I am urging the Committee to act favorably on the bill without delay.

The legislation sets aside some 3600 acres of timberland now under the jurisdiction of the Bureau of Land Management and provides for the transfer of 36 acres of land in the town of Siletz -- an area known as Government Hill -- to be the center of the tribe's community and cultural activities. It is the tribe's goal to prudently manage the reservation to meet its objectives of establishing community facilities and tribal programs. Revenue from tribal management of the timberlands will translate into a number of extremely important community facilities -- a tribal community center including meeting rooms, recreational facilities, a community kitchen, day care center and a health center. The tribe has worked closely with the City of Siletz and the public will the use of these facilities along with tribal members.

The reservation will have a positive effect on the economy of Lincoln County. At least 31 permanent full-time jobs will be created over the next decade on the reservation, with 91 off-reservation jobs. Moreover, there will be many temporary construction jobs as the tribe's community facilities are built. This will help to provide badly needed employment opportunities for Indians and non-Indians alike.

Now let me now turn to three provisions of HR 7267 which I have added to the original proposal submitted to Congress by the Department of the Interior as well as the bill that was passed by the Senate.

First, there is a provision which directs the Secretary of the Interior to reimburse the small City of Siletz for expenses it has incurred in planning for the transfer of Government Hill. There is a limit of \$5,000 on these expenditures and I understand that funds now exist within the Secretary's budget to cover such costs. This community has a small city budget and its resources have been tremendously strained through its planning efforts.

Second, this bill includes a provision that provides for the Secretary to pay to Lincoln County 5 percent of the proceeds from the tribe's timber sales for the next 25 years. This is discussed in the reservation plan and is intended to help mitigate any direct loss of BLM revenues which would normally accrue to the County.

Finally, there is a provision which addresses the question of hunting and fishing rights.

The planning process mandated by the 1977 Siletz Restoration Act initiated a comprehensive reservation planning evaluation that would take into account the needs of the tribe and the impact of a reservation on local non-Indians. It also allowed time for a final resolution of the hunting and fishing rights question. I was determined that, before any reservation was established, the question of special tribal hunting and fishing rights would be resolved. I took this position because of the bitter social strife that has resulted in Oregon and the State of Washington from a judicial determination superior tribal treaty fishing rights.

As a result, the State, the tribe and the United States entered into negotiations to resolve the nature and extent of tribal hunting and fishing rights. Various citizen groups, including sports and commercial fishing organizations, participated in the negotiations which resulted in an agreement in late April. This agreement was confirmed in a Consent Decree entered by the Federal District Court for Oregon on May 2, 1980 and is referenced in the legislation.

The agreement provides for the tribe to take a small amount of fish and game to meet basic tribal cultural and subsistence needs. The amount involved will have no negative impact on the fish and wildlife resources in the area and management remains with the State.

In overcoming this final obstacle, the Siletz Tribe deserves to be congratulated for its initiative and resolve. It was the Siletz who originated the negotiations with the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife. The Department also deserves full credit for negotiating willingly and well.

Let me conclude, Mr. Chairman, by repeating my hope that the Committee will move expeditiously in its deliberation on this legislation. The reservation it proposes means much to the Siletz people. It is a most important step in helping the tribe meet its goal: To improve the lives of its members by meeting their pressing needs and sustaining their sense of pride in their heritage.