

Testimony by Congressman Les AuCoin
Before the Subcommittee on Indian Affairs
and Public Lands of the
House Interior and Insular Affairs Committee
July 14, 1977

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today regarding legislation I have introduced to restore federal recognition for the Siletz Indian tribe in my Congressional District in Oregon. I appreciate the time constraints your subcommittee is under so I will be brief. Others who will follow me will lay out a detailed case for why the relatively modest requests included in my bill should be approved.

The main thing I want to stress today is my complete support for this legislation and what it seeks to do -- to give the Siletz people in Lincoln County, Oregon, the tools they badly need to help themselves. The tools include health and education benefits, but just as important, restoration of tribal recognition. I am convinced that tribal status is crucial to Indians and is a cornerstone for their collective successes. To non-Indians, it may seem superfluous, unnecessary, even silly. To Indians it is the vessel for their cultural rediscovery.

The bill is straightforward and singular in its purpose. The main difference between this bill and similar legislation I introduced last year is that in this measure no reservation is created. Instead, a two-year study is instituted to assess creation of a reservation, requiring a separate act of Congress to form it. In my campaign for re-election last fall, I told the voters of my District I intended to separate the issue of tribal restoration from re-establishment of a reservation in the belief the two are separate and distinct issues. Incidentally, my opponent in that race said he opposed the bill altogether. I guess I don't need to verbalize the conclusion I draw from that.

This leads me to the main point I want to make today. Others will tell you the problems the Siletz people are groping with and what they think this legislation will do to help solve some of those problems. However, some people will raise an objection to this bill, claiming it has something to do with hunting and fishing rights.

Let me make it extremely clear in the record that it is not my intention as the sponsor of this legislation to restore, grant or benefit in any way any claim the Siletz may have or

make for hunting and fishing rights. This bill is, and is meant to be, neutral on that issue. This is not by accident. It is by design.

Because of the gravity of the broad, complex issue of superior Indian fishing and hunting rights, I naturally have researched extensively to see if somehow this legislation would have an impact, even an inadvertent one. After that study, I am convinced there is no impact. I avoided pushing this legislation in the last Congress until I could satisfy myself on that count. I am submitting for the record a copy of an article I wrote for The Oregonian newspaper in which I lay out several of the sources for this conclusion. Individual copies have been made available to each member of the sub-committee.

Let me add just one more comment on this point. I believe the Siletz Indians have been extremely honorable in the way they have pursued this legislation. At every point, they have leveled with me about what they really want from this legislation. Superior hunting and fishing rights is not one of those goals. Indeed, the tribe has expressed a willingness to go on record indicating it would go to court in the event of any litigation on such rights and say that the Siletz Tribal Restoration Act should not be seen as giving any special rights or procedural benefits to litigants.

Finally, let me conclude by urging you to consider the example of the Siletz -- a small, powerless tribe that found itself manipulated, like so many other tribes, into termination. The result: the Siletz found themselves much worse off than before. Unemployment among Siletz Indians in Lincoln County has reached as high as 44 per cent. The median annual income for Siletz Indian families is \$3,333. Some 44 per cent of Indians aged 17 to 25 did not finish high school and 23 per cent of Indian school children come from broken homes.

But even though the tribe was ill-prepared for the realities of termination and many Indians floundered as alcoholism, divorce, unemployment, suicide and school drop-out rates soared, the Siletz maintained an identity, a sense of community that persists today. It is a strong bond that may never be broken.

Thanks to far-sighted leaders such as Joe Lane and Art Bensell, the Siletz began to regroup on their own, making their way down the road to where their tribe would exist again. In the early 1970s, Indian leaders formed a non-profit corporation. It was the beginning, positive step of a people determined to reunite as a tribe. Since then, the tribe has undertaken

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several programs to tackle the many social and economic problems its people suffer. This effort has won the admiration of Lincoln County and Town of Siletz officials who support this legislation.

These Indian people, gentlemen, stand ready now to accept restoration of their tribe as a federally recognized entity. These are not people groveling for a hand out. These are determined people who have earned the dignity of being called by this Nation a tribe once more.

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