

Wednesday, October 26, 2011

Washington, D.C. – Congressman Ben Ray Luján of New Mexico’s Third District offered an amendment today to H.R. 1904, the Southeast Arizona Land Exchange and Conservation Act. His amendment would protect American Indian sacred and cultural sites from a land exchange between the federal government and Resolution Copper, Co., a subsidiary of Rio Tinto PLC and BHP Billiton Ltd. Below are Luján’s remarks as delivered.

“Mr. Chairman, thank you very much. My amendment is significant, but simple. My amendment does not kill this project. As offered, it simply asks this Congress to respect the religious and sacred sites of our tribal brothers and sisters.

“This bill does little, if anything, to offer protection to the sacred sites in the area, and does not offer true tribal consultation to the tribes. We all know that consultation occurs before, not after, decisions have already been made. The tribes in this area believe Resolution Copper’s block cave mining method will have negative impacts on their sacred, cultural, and traditional sites in the area.

“Again, this amendment will not kill this project. It would show respect and offer protections to both surface and subsurface sites in the proposed land conveyance. More specifically, my amendment states that “the Federal land to be conveyed may not include any Native American sacred or cultural site, whether surface or subsurface.” This amendment would merely offer a basic level of respect for religious and cultural sites to the many tribes in the region.

“As our dear friend Congressman Kildee reminds us daily, we have a Trust responsibility to our tribal brothers and sisters, and those who oppose this responsibility will dismantle it piece by piece with a scalpel and not all at once with an axe. That is what we are seeing today Mr. Chairman.

“In its current form, H.R. 1904 would approve a federal land exchange to transfer ownership of 2,400 acres of land on the Tonto National Forest to Resolution Copper for purposes of a block cave copper mine.

“The federal lands which are proposed to be exchanged, generally known as Oak Flat, are part of the ancestral lands of the San Carlos Apache Tribe and other tribes in the region. These lands have unique religious, traditional, and archeological significance to many tribes in southern Arizona. Behind me is a photo of one of those areas that is most sacred, Apache Leap.

“You have heard from my colleagues on the other side of the aisle that their bill offers protections for the sacred, traditional, and cultural sites in the proposed area to be exchanged, but I don’t believe that to be true.

“If it were true, then why is every major tribal organization in the country opposing this bill? It is because they do not believe these so-called protections to be real. Opposing organizations include but are not limited to: the National Congress of American Indians, the United South and Eastern Tribes, the All Indian Pueblo Council of New Mexico, the San Carlos Apache Tribe, the Jicarilla and Mescalero Apache tribes of New Mexico, and many other tribes across this country.

“Mr. Chairman, all of these organizations and tribal leaders know that the degradation of these cultural sites means a loss of identity and culture, not to mention utter disrespect for the religion and history of the tribes connected to this area.

“Just to be clear, supporting my amendment will not kill the project. It would simply mean respecting and preserving the religious, cultural, archeological, and historic significance of the lands that mean so much to the tribes in the region. I urge my colleagues to support my amendment.”

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Congressman Luján continues to discuss the importance of protecting American Indian sacred and cultural sites.

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