

Yurok chair testifies on Yurok Lands Act

September 20, 2022



On Wednesday, September 14, Yurok Chairman Joseph L. James informed the US Natural Resources' Subcommittee for Indigenous Peoples of the United States about the critical importance of the Yurok lands act (H.R.7581).

Introduced by US Congress Member Jared Huffman, the bill seeks to revise the reservation boundary line to include reacquired tribal land and facilitate the transfer of the Yurok Experimental Forest back to the Tribe, which lost more than 98 percent of its ancestral territory in the 1800s. The bill will also designate Bald Hills Road as the Yurok Scenic Byway.

"The passage of the Yurok lands act will benefit our community for many generations to come," said Joseph L. James, the chairman of the Yurok Tribe. "In addition to giving us a portion of our land back, the act will strengthen our ability to sovereignly manage our landscape in accordance with the Yurok Constitution. We ask Congress to be a part of the solution and pass the legislation."

The Yurok lands act is one element of the Tribe's larger plan to achieve two key objectives outlined in the Preamble of the Yurok Constitution. The preamble places upon the Yurok Tribal Council a responsibility to "Reclaim the tribal land base within the Yurok Reservation and enlarge the Reservation boundaries to the maximum extent possible within the ancestral lands of our tribe."

During the last decade, the Tribe has regained approximately 70,000 acres of forested lands in Yurok ancestral territory. On one parcel, the Tribe created a 15,000-acre Old Growth Forest and Salmon Sanctuary in the Blue Creek watershed to enhance fish runs and permanently protect one of the most biologically diverse ecosystems in the West.

The Yurok lands act will redraw the reservation boundary to include recovered lands, which roughly parallel the current reservation border between Blue Creek and Weitchpec.

Across the Yurok Reservation, the Tribe is restoring the highly productive forest and aquatic habitats that existed in Yurok Country for millennia. The Yurok Fisheries and Forestry Departments, in collaboration with the Yurok Watershed Restoration and Roads Department, the Yurok Tribe Construction Corporation and Condor Aviation, design and complete these large-scale rewilding projects, which benefit a wide variety of native fish and wildlife. The Yurok Tribal Council is constantly working to reacquire and restore more of the Tribe's ancestral landscape. Coupled with the Yurok lands act, these complementary initiatives are essential components of the Tribe's effort to build a food-secure and economically prosperous reservation.

The Yurok lands act accomplishes the following:

- Transfers of U.S. Forest Service land known as the Yurok Experimental Forest into trust for the tribe
- Redraws the reservation boundary line to encompass the Yurok Experimental Forest, recently purchased fee land and a property in proximity to the Blue Creek watershed, one of the Tribe's most sacred areas
- Designates Bald Hills Road as the Yurok Scenic Byway