

Naelyn Pike, Youth Organizer, Apache Stronghold
Written Testimony for the House Natural Resources
Subcommittee for Indigenous Peoples of the United States
Oversight Hearing on
“The Irreparable Environmental and Cultural Impacts of the
Proposed Resolution Copper Mining Operation.”

March 12, 2020

My name is Naelyn Pike, and it is an honor to testify today before the Subcommittee on behalf of Apache youth. I have traveled here to testify from the San Carlos Apache Reservation (Reservation) in rural southeast Arizona. I am Chiricahua Apache, and my family has lived in what is now Southeastern Arizona since time immemorial. In the late 1800's, the United States forcibly removed my people from the land and drove the Apaches onto the Reservation, where they were made prisoners of war. While we were forced to leave our sacred places at gunpoint, these areas still retain their spiritual, cultural, and historical connection to Apache people.

At least eight Apache Clans and two Western Apache Bands have documented history in what is today known as Oak Flat and Apache Leap area. Our people lived, prayed, and died in the Oak Flat and Tonto National Forest area for centuries. Apache Leap was given its name after Apache Warriors leaped to their death rather than be killed by the United States Cavalry. These areas make us who we are today.

I am here today to advocate for my land, my culture, and my home, on behalf of the next generation and the generations that will come after me.

BACKGROUND

In 2014, Congress passed the 2015 National Defense Reauthorization Act (NDAA), which included Section 3003, the Southeast Arizona Land Exchange. The provision gave a 2,422-acre parcel of U.S. Forest Service land to Resolution Copper, a foreign-owned mining conglomerate, in exchange for privately owned land in Arizona that would be managed by the US Forest Service and the Bureau of Land Management. The land Congress gave to Resolution Copper includes Chi'Chil *Bildagoteel* or Oak Flat.

Resolution Copper proposes to use block-cave mining to remove the ore body underneath the land. The project will destroy the area and leave a massive crater. Oak Flat will be destroyed. The natural springs and life-giving water will be forever contaminated and depleted, and massive infrastructure projects, including pipelines, will be built under Apache Leap. I cannot overstate how destructive this will be to our sacred land.

Native people have fought tirelessly since 2005 to try and stop the land exchange from becoming law. Despite the widespread tribal, environmental, and religious opposition, Congress included the land exchange in the massive, must-pass NDAA legislation in 2014. While the land exchange was signed into law, Apaches and our allies have not stopped fighting to protect our land. The Save Oak Flat Act (H.R. 665 and S.173) repeals Section 3003 and ensures that no destructive mining will take place on our sacred land.

SPIRITUAL CONNECTION

Chi'Chil Bildagoteel is my home, it is who I am, and it is where I am free to be Apache. Apache people are deeply connected to our traditions and to the land that we have called home since first put here by *Usen*, the Creator. Apache people come to Oak Flat to participate in Holy Ground and the Sunrise Dance ceremonies, to pray, to gather medicines and ceremonial items, and to seek and obtain peace and personal cleansing.

My great-grandmother and my ancestors lived along Oak flat's ridge and the river, which runs down from the north. They fought to keep Oak flat and Apache leap. This was home, the place where *Usen* put the *Gaan* to bring blessings to the people.

I still feel a strong spiritual connection to mother earth and *Usen* at Oak Flat. It is who I am and where I am free to be Apache. Oak Flat is where Apache's can practice our culture, to connect with our ancestors, and to live the spiritual connection to the land and Creator. It is not just the wind hitting my face or my feet hitting the ground, it is the spirits who are talking through the wind to show that they are here with us, and my feet waking up the earth, telling the spirits that we are still here, and we are still fighting, not ready to give up. When I am at Oak Flat, I see what the Creator has blessed us with and that *Usen* has touched this place. I feel it in my heart

and understand why my great grandmother and her people fought for Oak flat and Apache Leap. That is my holy place too. *Usen* has touched these sacred places, and I am here to hold that.

Through my entire existence, I was consistently brought back to Oak Flat. My family would come together for prayer and ceremony. When the red berries and the acorn were in season, I was taken to Oak Flat to gather our traditional foods. With the food we collected, we were able to feed our families. Through this practice, I was able to learn my role as an Apache girl and to live our culture. The acorn, berries, and medicinal plants can never be replaced. Nor can they ever be relocated to a different area. *Usen* has planted these plants and herbs there for a reason. To me, Oak Flat is home, and it will always be home.

SUNRISE CEREMONY

Oak Flat is one of the sacred areas where Apaches hold the coming of age Sunrise Ceremony for girls to mark their entrance into womanhood. The ceremony begins when a girl goes to the sacred land and builds a wikkiup, which becomes their new home for the journey ahead.

On the first day of my ceremony, I made the four Apache breads for the medicine man and my godparents. My godmother helped me dress in my traditional clothing and stayed with me throughout the ceremony. On the second day of the ceremony, I woke up when the sun started to rise. I danced and prayed with my godmother, godfather, and my partner by my side. I danced to the sun, the Creator. I hit the ground hard with my cane in time with the drumbeat to wake up the sacred mountain, the spirits, and the *Gaans*, also known as Angels, bringing them back to life. Without the power of the *Gaans*, the Apache people cannot conduct our ceremonies. I awoke the *Gaans* and danced beside them, tears streaming down my face. On the third day, my partner and I danced underneath the four sacred poles. This day is when I became the white-painted woman. My godfather and the *Gaans* painted me with the *Glesh*. In our creation story, the white-painted woman came out of the earth, covered with white ash from the earth's surface. Being painted with the *Glesh* represents the white-painted woman and her entrance into a new life. The paint molds and glues the prayers and blessings from the ceremony onto me. With my face completely covered, my godmother wiped my eyes with a handkerchief. Once my eyes opened, I looked upon the world not as a little girl, but as a changed woman. At the end of my dance, my family

and friends congratulated me. We all cried because I was no longer a girl; I was now a woman. On the last day of my ceremony, my grandmother undressed me and took me to the stream so I could bathe. While she washed my hair, a small green hummingbird flew right in front of us and hovered about before it flew toward the sky. I knew this was a great blessing. I dressed in my everyday clothes, and we went back to the camp.

I had become a woman and followed in the footsteps of Apache girls that have come before me. My ceremony is just one part of an Apache way of life. It is our religious right to be able to practice these ceremonies in these sacred places. How can we practice our ceremonies at Oak Flat when it is destroyed? How will the future Apache girls and boys know what it is to be Apache, to know our home when it is gone?

IMPACT ON YOUTH

I am proud to be a member of the Apache Stronghold and to be standing up and making my voice heard on behalf of Apache and other indigenous youth. Young people are standing up today to protect our culture and a way of life that has been under attack for too long. Through massacre, forced removal from the land, and sending children to far-off boarding schools, the United States has tried to stifle Native voices and suppress our culture. I am here today to say that the next generation will not be silenced. Native youth understand that it is now our responsibility to stand together proudly and ensure our culture is protected for our children and our children's children.

If Resolution Copper is able to develop the mine at Oak Flat my future children and grandchildren will never be able to see the beauty and feel the power of *Chi'chil Bildagoteel*. They will never be able to pick the acorn and berries to feed their families. They will never be able to use the medicinal herbs to heal naturally. They will never hear the echoes and see the silhouettes of the *Gaans* in the canyons. They will never be able to feel the connection of *Usen* the way I feel it today if Resolution Copper is allowed to destroy Oak Flat.

In the DEIS, Tonto National Forest discusses the Apache way of life in the past tense as if it is ancient history. I hope Congress understands that the Apache way of life is not just history, but

the present and future. We are living and breathing. The culture and traditions are very much alive, and we pray every day that they will continue.

CONCLUSION

The DEIS makes it clear that the mining project proposed by Resolution Copper will destroy the Oak Flat area. The block cave mining technique will obliterate the nature of the land, its ecology, and its sacred powers forever.

Congress has an opportunity to pave a path between tribal nations and the federal government to build a better life for our people and to uphold its trust responsibility. This country was created for citizens to believe in the American Dream. As prisoners of the United States, indigenous people were left out of that dream. That dream continues to pass over indigenous people to this day. We are still fighting to practice our first amendment rights and our culture. The right to our religion is being stripped away through Section 3003. It is in Congress' power to make a difference. I urge the Committee and the Congress as a whole to stand up for Native youth, to stand up for our culture, and to do right by indigenous people.