

Senate approves Reservation Act amendment bill

Tribes continue to oppose Siletz legislation that also was passed

By Dean Rhodes
Smoke Signals editor

The U.S. Senate approved two bills on Friday, July 15: one that the Grand Ronde Tribe liked very much and the other that the Tribe has opposed since it was first introduced.

The first bill, to amend the Grand Ronde Reservation Act, was introduced by Oregon Sens. Ron Wyden and Jeff Merkley. It was passed out of the Senate Committee on Indian Affairs on Nov. 18, 2015.

The bill would amend the Reservation Act to create a one-step process that would allow the Grand Ronde Tribe to take land within its original Reservation of more than 60,000 acres into trust as on-reservation land and once the land is taken into trust it would automatically become part of the Tribe's Reservation.

Currently, the Grand Ronde Tribe must apply to the Bureau of Indian Affairs for a fee-to-trust application when it purchases land.



Contributed photo

Tribal Council Secretary Cheryle A. Kennedy met with Oregon Sen. Jeff Merkley during his Town Hall meeting held in Tillamook on Wednesday, July 20. Kennedy said she discussed the passage of Senate Bill 817 with Merkley, who co-sponsored the bill with Oregon Sen. Ron Wyden.

After the land is accepted into trust

by the BIA, the Tribe must amend its Reservation Act through congressional action for the land to be considered part of the Reservation.

The Tribe has been working for more than seven years to amend the Restoration Act. During the last Congress, the amendments were passed by the House, but did not get through the Senate before Congress adjourned.

The other bill, however, is opposed by the Grand Ronde Tribe because it would expand the area in which the Secretary of the Interior could take land into trust for the Siletz Tribe to include Tillamook and Yamhill counties, both counties allocated to the Grand Ronde Tribe in its Restoration Act.

Currently, the Siletz Tribe is limited to taking land into trust within Lincoln County.

The bill's passage was addressed by Tribal Council Chairman Reyn Leno and Tribal Council Secretary Cheryle A. Kennedy at the Tuesday, July 26, Legislative Action Committee hearing.

Kennedy said she discussed the bill's passage with Merkley, who also introduced it with Wyden, during a Town Hall meeting held in Tillamook on Wednesday, July 20.

"I asked him about what his intention was for helping to take care of the issue that has been created with the passage of Senate Bill 817," Kennedy said. "And I asked him if he would be directly involved because we had opposed many times and presented issues.

Of course, he kind of said 'I was not the lead on it,' which we knew. I said we acknowledge that and know that, but he certainly needed to be part of the solution."

Leno said the bill's passage could potentially create conflict between the two Tribes.

"Our membership tends to think we argue a lot with these other Tribes, but what this bill is about is basically another Tribe trying to come in and take Tillamook County," Leno said. "Our membership knows, or should know, that in the Restoration Act we received Tillamook, Polk and Yamhill counties. So this bill would actually give another Tribe rights in Tillamook County. That is the reason we are opposing it.

"We're not opposing it just to fight with another Tribe. We're opposing it because we feel that's our land, that's where our people come from. The county acknowledges that; a lot of other people acknowledge that.

"If you get two Tribes overseeing one county, you are going to have conflict, and that is what we don't want, conflict over remains and artifacts. ... These disputes, when you have two Tribes fighting, the government always says, 'You guys have to work it out between yourselves,' and that just never works."

Kennedy said the Grand Ronde Tribe requested a mediation session through Bureau of Indian Affairs Northwest Regional Director Stanley Speaks. The Siletz Tribe declined the offer, she added.

Wyoming Sen. John Barrasso, chairman of the Senate Committee on Indian Affairs, said in a press release that the House of Representatives will take up both bills in the near future.

To become law, the bills need to be passed by the House and then signed by President Barack Obama. ■

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