

Honorable Daniel K. Akaka  
Chairman, Committee on Indian Affairs  
United States Senate  
Washington, D.C. 20510-6450

Dear Mr. Chairman:

The \_\_\_\_\_ [Insert Name of Indian or Alaska Native nation] applauds the Senate Committee on Indian Affairs for considering the domestic policy implications of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. While the United States' endorsement of the Declaration was a good first step in recognizing the rights of indigenous peoples, it will be meaningless unless followed by actual changes in the law to recognize and protect those rights.

As Native peoples, we are often asked why the endorsement of the Declaration by the United States is important. Why should the U.S. government reform its policy towards indigenous peoples in line with the Declaration? The answers are simple, yet important.

The United States' endorsement of the Declaration provides hope that the general laws of the United States, many of which are mirrored in the language of the Declaration, will be honored and respected for all citizens of the United States, including Native peoples. It is our expectation that the endorsement will lead to increased respect by federal and state policy makers for the cultures and lands and territories of Native nations, and for our right to make our own decisions regarding issues that affect us. We urge you to use the principles in the Declaration as a guide to improve the laws and policies impacting Native individuals and nations and the government-to-government relationship.

The Declaration also sets an agenda for the United States and Native nations to design a reasonable and progressive approach for realizing all of the mentioned rights of Native peoples and responsibilities of the United States. The Declaration also is a yard stick to evaluate how existing and proposed federal laws and policies measure up to the standards of the Declaration. Does a law or bill meet the standards of the Declaration? It should and, if it doesn't, then the law or bill should be changed or discarded.

For example, under the Declaration, countries should protect indigenous women against all forms of violence and discrimination. Native women are more than twice as likely to be victims of violence, in large part because tribes lack the jurisdictional authority to prosecute outsiders. Changing federal laws and policies to allow tribal governments to police and prosecute violent crimes in their communities adequately would have a tremendous impact on Native women in the United States.

The \_\_\_\_\_ [Insert Name of Indian or Alaska Native Nation] particularly wants changes in federal laws and policies regarding \_\_\_\_\_. [ADD POINTS ABOUT THE SPECIFIC CONCERNS OF YOUR COMMUNITY] [Examples: The Declaration calls for some way to recognize the rights of indigenous peoples, including providing the right to redress when lands, territories, or resources of Native nations have been taken without their free, prior, and informed consent. Access to federal courts for wrongs related to our Native lands and resources continues to be very problematic. Judicial requirements make it impossible or at the best burdensome for indigenous peoples to obtain any real justice in the federal courts. Strengthening access to the courts for Indian and Alaska Native nations and other indigenous peoples is long overdue.] [The Declaration recognizes the right of indigenous peoples to maintain and strengthen their sacred sites. Yet, protection of these sacred sites and of indigenous peoples' access to these sites continues to adversely affect the spiritual practices of Native nations. Consultations between Native nations and the federal government is needed to address the lack of a statutory right to sue in the federal courts to protect these rights.]

Simply put, U.S. endorsement of the Declaration acknowledges that our rights matter, and gives us greater confidence that the United States will finally recognize and address the concerns of Native peoples. Please take affirmative steps to make the UN Declaration an integral part of the United States' commitment to bring real and lasting change for the Native nations of this country.

Thank you.

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