

P R E S S R E L E A S E

Karuk Tribe

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REPORT: LAMALFA TRIBAL RESTORATION BILL “INTELLECTUALLY DISHONEST” *LaMalfa’s HR3535 ‘Restores’ a Tribe that Never Was*

Happy Camp, CA— Rep. Doug LaMalfa (R-Richvale) recently introduced a controversial bill to restore a terminated Indian Rancheria in Siskiyou County called Ruffey Rancheria. However, historic records show that Ruffey Rancheria was little more than a parcel of land on which no Indian ever lived, leading noted Indian scholar Dr. Stephen Dow Beckham to describe HR 3535 as “intellectually dishonest” in a newly released report.

HR 3535 was introduced last fall and it passed out of the House Natural Resources committee on May 8th by a single vote. Citing a lack of information, a secretive mark-up, and unprecedented legislative language, over 70 federally recognized California Tribes called for a re-hearing of the bill. “The concerns of California Tribes were ignored by Congressman LaMalfa in the rush to a committee vote. Now we know why,” says Karuk Chairman Russell “Buster” Attebery.

Because their numerous information requests to the Ruffey group ‘Chairman’ Tahj Gomes and Congressman LaMalfa were ignored, the Karuk Tribe retained the prominent historian Dr. Stephen Dow Beckham to research the issue. “Basically, my research reveals that no one ever lived on Ruffey Rancheria, there was never a roll or list of members, and there was no government relationship between the United States and any group identifying as the Ruffey Rancheria,” explains Dr. Beckham. “There is simply nothing to restore.”

HR 3535 was introduced abruptly last fall without any prior outreach to the Karuk or any other federally recognized tribes. Despite numerous letters and requests for specific information, Ruffey ‘Chairman’ Tahj Gomes has never revealed who is on the Ruffey governing council, who the members are, or any evidence that Ruffey Rancheria ever existed as anything other than an unoccupied plot of land.

The history of Ruffey Rancheria dates back to 1905 when special Indian Agent Charles Kelsey traveled all over California documenting landless Indians and reporting to Congress. Congress allocated money for Kelsey to buy lands for Indians living in poverty conditions in various communities. In 1907 Kelsey purchased 441 acres near Etna, CA for 2 Karuk families.

Kelsey thought the land he bought included the home of ‘Old Man Ruffey,’ a Karuk Indian born in Somes Bar, California; however, after getting the property surveyed he found that it did not. Upon further investigation, Kelsy came to realize that the land he purchased was not particularly suitable due to the poor soils, lack of water, and steep hills. In the end, neither Old Man Ruffey’s family, nor anyone else, ever actually relocated to or lived on the land. In fact, there are no records of any Indians actually living there.

Pursuant to the California Rancheria Termination Act, the Sacramento Area Office of BIA developed a distribution plan and held a vote of Ruffey’s identified heirs on September 5, 1959. The three Abernathy grandchildren voted unanimously in favor of the plan. The Department of Interior deeded the 441 acres on November 14, 1959, to the Abernathy heirs who then sold the land on February 11, 1960, to the International Paper Company.

‘Chairman’ Gomes claimed in Congressional testimony that his “community has a long history of interaction of federal and California state governments.” Beckham’s Report proves otherwise. “I could find very few documents or letters or correspondence demonstrating interactions between Ruffey Rancheria and state and federal governments despite an exhaustive search of BIA archives,” says Dr. Beckham.

There is no evidence that anyone ever lived on the land purchased, there is no history of a tribal government forming, and no history of any governmental services being provided to anyone affiliated with Ruffey. “We support the right of all Indian People to self-govern and be part of a federally recognized tribe,” says Karuk Chairman Attebery, “but Gomes’ ancestors were afforded that opportunity and took full advantage of it.”

Ruffey ‘Chairman’ Tahj Gomes, who until recently self-identified as Chairman of the Etna Band of Shasta Indians (another poorly documented group), is actually a first generation Karuk descendant (meaning he lacks the blood quantum necessary for enrollment). His mother is enrolled with Karuk, his grandmother was enrolled Karuk, and his great-grandfather was enrolled with Karuk. His great uncle was a chairman of the Quartz Valley Tribe.

Possibly the most unsettling aspect of the Ruffey fabrication is the claims they make on Siskiyou County water resources. Although the original land purchased as Ruffey Rancheria had little in the way of water resources, HR 3535 would allow a restored Ruffey Rancheria to establish reservation lands anywhere in Siskiyou County and establish water claims. This could be disruptive for area farmers and fisheries restoration efforts.

“LaMalfa and Gomes are inventing a Tribe from scratch and offering virtually no information on who these people are or what their ancestral ties are to this place. This effort diminishes what it means to be a Tribe and dishonors the concept of Tribal sovereignty for all Indians,” concludes Attebery.

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Editors' Notes

Stephen Dow Beckham holds the Pamplin Chair of History at Lewis & Clark College. A graduate of the University of Oregon and the University of California, Los Angeles, he has taught courses on Native Americans and the American West for 42 years. Beckham was named "Oregon Professor of the Year" and is recipient of the Asher Distinguished Teaching Award, American Historical Association.

Beckham has researched and written Federal Acknowledgment petitions, testified in federal district court and the U.S. Claims Court, and testified before Congress in matters related to Indian tribes. He has assisted tribes in enrollment documentation, clarification of reservation status and treaty rights, and mounted a number of teacher institutes through the Indian Education Act and its amendments.

Beckham's other books include *Requiem for a People: The Rogue Indians and the Frontiersmen*, *Oregon Indians: Voices from Two Centuries*, *Many Faces: An Anthology of Oregon Autobiography*, and *The Literature of the Lewis and Clark Expedition*. He is a contributing author to several volumes of the *Handbook of North American Indians* and to *Native Americans in the Twentieth Century*.

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