

Opening Statement by Senator Burr (R-NC)  
Hearing before the Senate Committee on Indian Affairs  
S.2285, Lumbee Recognition Bill  
September 7, 2016

---

Good afternoon Chairman Barrasso, Vice- Chairman Tester, and Members of this committee. I appreciate the Committee's time and effort regarding Federal Recognition of the Lumbee tribe.

I would like to thank my North Carolina colleagues, Representative Richard Hudson and Representative G.K. Butterfield, for their passion and dedication to the issue.

I would also like to thank Chairman Harvey Godwin, who was sworn in as Chairman earlier this year, for traveling up from North Carolina for the hearing. I welcome him, and his son Quinn who is with him today, to Washington.

Chairman Godwin brings with him over 20 years of business experience and a long history of public service to his community. He has been a proven leader in Robeson County, and I know he will bring that same work ethic and integrity to the Lumbee Tribal Council and Tribe.

For more than a century the Lumbee have been recognized as American Indians. North Carolina recognized the tribe in 1885, and the tribe began their quest for federal recognition three years later in 1888.

The Lumbee are in a unique situation. They are the largest Indian tribe east of the Mississippi, with a membership of 34,000-- and yet they have remained unrecognized for over a century.

The Lumbee Act of 1956 designated the Indians “residing in Robeson and adjoining counties of North Carolina” as the “Lumbee Indians of North Carolina”. The Act also inexplicably prevented the Lumbee from being eligible for any services provided by the federal government or any benefits that are provided to other tribes.

While the Lumbee Act somewhat “recognized” the tribe, it was strictly conditional. This 1950s-era law specifically blocked federal assistance to the Lumbee Tribe. It is nothing short of discrimination.

And decades of discrimination against the Lumbee have resulted in severe economic and societal consequences for their people. Robeson County is one of the ten poorest counties in the United States. The 1956 law has put them on unequal footing compared to other federally recognized tribes, and it has prevented them from obtaining access to critical services through the Bureau of Indian Affairs and the Indian Health Service. This is simply unjust and immoral.

When the Bureau of Indian Affairs established its process for formal recognition in the 1970s, the Lumbee were once again denied equal treatment and barred from participating due to the 1956 Lumbee Act.

They were denied a third time in 1989, when the Department of Interior determined that the Lumbee Act of 1956 prohibits the tribe from going through the BIA process, and the only way for the Tribe to obtain full federal recognition would be by an act of Congress.

The BIA process is reserved for tribes whose legitimacy must be established.

As we know, and when you hear from Chairman Godwin today, the Lumbee have established legitimacy time and time again.

The Lumbee have been part of eastern North Carolina's history for centuries, and like Chairman Godwin, they have served their community effectively, and tirelessly. They have been teachers, farmers, doctors, and small business owners. Some have served as sheriffs, clerks of court, state legislators or judges. Many have protected our nation by serving in the United States Armed Forces. The contributions they've made to their local communities and the state of North Carolina have not gone unrecognized or unappreciated.

The question I want the committee to ask themselves today is, "How can this federally recognized tribe be denied the benefits that other federally recognized tribes receive through their sovereignty?"

This tribe is not looking for a hand out, but a hand up. That hand up is full federal recognition that will give them the additional tools needed to improve the economic situation in their counties, in their health system, and in their schools.

I am confident that after Chairman Godwin's testimony today you will understand the injustice and discriminatory policies against the Lumbee Tribe. The Lumbee were put into this situation by Congress in 1956, and it is time we act and grant the tribe their much deserved full federal recognition. I ask that you right this wrong doing for current and future generations of Lumbee.

Thank you again, Mr. Chairman, for the privilege of speaking on an issue that is important to me and so many North Carolinians.