

Committee on Resources

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U.S. Senator Elizabeth Dole

*Statement at the Hearing on the Lumbee Recognition Act
By the House Resource Committee
Washington, D.C.
April 1, 2004*

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for holding this important hearing today. I sincerely want to thank both you and the Committee for allowing me to testify.

There are many here in this room who are champions for the Lumbee – ranking Member Congressman Rahall – you are among them – and I thank you.

Also, I want to recognize the other two members of this panel. Congressman McIntyre has worked tirelessly on Lumbee Recognition. And Congressman Burr, who will testify later, continues to show a real commitment to serving all the people of North Carolina.

Most importantly, I want to recognize and publicly thank the members of the Lumbee Tribe, who traveled here from North Carolina. Once again, I am in awe of their steadfast determination and commitment to recognition. And it's contagious! It is my privilege to join you in your passionate pursuit for fair acknowledgment from the Federal Government.

A terrible injustice that has been done to the Lumbee Indians—full federal recognition for this Tribe has been unfairly denied for over a century.

Given that this was the subject of the first legislation I submitted as a Senator, I am committed to achieving the goal of recognition. I have great respect for the Lumbee people, a tribe of great pride even after decades of disappointments. Spending time with them – on so many different occasions - has invigorated me in my effort to end this injustice.

Formally recognized by the state of North Carolina in 1885, the tribe began a quest for federal recognition just three years later. Mr. Chairman, this means they have been looking for federal recognition for over 116 years!

Time and time again – in 1913, 1914 and yet again in 1933 – studies at the U.S. Department of Interior have determined that the Lumbee are indeed an Indian Tribe, descended from the historic Cheraw Indians.

After years of stalled legislation, finally, in 1956, Congress passed the Lumbee Bill which recognized the Tribe.

Unfortunately – there was a caveat – and the Tribe belatedly learned they were denied the benefits and privileges that every other federally recognized Tribe enjoys. Mr. Chairman, that caveat is what brings us here today.

This discrimination must end. The Lumbees deserve full recognition for their Tribe – not a partial nod that ignores the history and the efforts of so many ancestors.

I introduced S. 420 as my first bill in the United States Senate with one word in mind: fairness. Final passage of this legislation will allow the Tribe to receive long overdue assistance in areas like education, health care and economic development funding.

I know there are those who have argued – and will do so again today – that the Lumbees should go through the Bureau of Indian Affairs for federal recognition. But that process is reserved for Tribes whose legitimacy must be established. There is no need for that in the case of the Lumbee. Time and again, the legitimacy of the Tribe has been established.

Yesterday this Committee heard testimony about the BIA recognition process, a process which appears to be fundamentally flawed. Both this committee and your counterparts in the Senate have been seeking a better way. To force the Lumbee into that system would not only be unfair but unconscionable!

According to a 2001 GAO report, it can take up to 15 years to resolve completed petitions for recognition. 15 years! The Lumbees have already waited far too long. It is wrong to impose yet another lengthy delay on this Tribe. It's been 116 years, Mr. Chairman – let's not make them wait another 15!

Let us do the fair thing, the right thing, to resolve this injustice. The Lumbee Tribe, with 53,000 members, is the largest Tribe east of the Mississippi and the largest non-federally recognized Tribe in America. And the Lumbees have contributed so much, not just to North Carolina's heritage, but to our entire nation.

There is no better way to say it: They deserve full recognition...and they deserve it now!

Mr. Chairman, I appreciate your attention to this critical issue for North Carolina and the Lumbee people. I pray this is the year when we will truly see a resolution of this very important matter. Mr. Chairman, as you know, I must asked to be excused now to attend a Senate hearing, but I thank you again for the privilege of expressing my passion for this cause.