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Leelanau County Government Center
8527 E. Government Center Drive, Suite #101
Suttons Bay, Michigan 49682
(231) 256-9711 ♦ (866) 256-9711 toll free
(231) 256-0120 fax
leelanau.cc ♦ cjanik@co.leelanau.mi.us

June 1, 2017

The Honorable John W “Jack” Bergman
414 Cannon House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Congressman Bergman:

My name is Ty Wessell and I am the District 4 Commissioner of Leelanau County. My district contains tribal trust land of the Grand Traverse Band of Ottawa and Chippewa Indians upon which several tribal families reside, and those families have resided on that land since the federal treaty allotment period in the 1855-1880s. I write to express my opinion on the recent oversight hearing on Indian trust land held on May 24 by the Investigative Oversight subcommittee of the House Natural Resources Committee.

It has been brought to my attention that a California county commissioner witness alleged that land taken into trust under the Indian Reorganization Act (IRA) is an abuse of federal administrative discretion and detrimental to State county interests. While I cannot speak for California counties, I can freely speak as a Michigander and current county commissioner of Leelanau County that we have in general a large Indian population in the county, and in particular, I have several Indian families in my district; therefore, as both a county commissioner and a former superintendent of a public school system in Leelanau county, I can assure you that the presence of tribal trust land is not detrimental to our county, nor is it administratively abusive for the federal government to put land into trust for the benefit of tribal governments and tribal members.

Leelanau County is situated squarely within a treaty-established reservation for the Grand Traverse Band of Ottawa and Chippewa Indians (GTB). Under the treaties of 1836 and 1855 a significant proportion of GTB land was ceded to the federal government; the treaties reserved land for GTB and several other bands. The 1855 treaty intended to established individual tribal trust allotments, a process that had its own deprivations that ultimately resulted in significant loss of Indian land. That Indian land loss had consequential effects of severe poverty for GTB Indians, dislocation, disease, loss of Indian families’ members to adoption, death and loss of their cultural heritage and treaty recognized rights.

The federal recognition of GTB in 1980, based on the long term federal-tribal relationship between the United States and GTB, and the subsequent positive federal trust land developments for housing, jobs, governmental structures under the IRA, have benefited both the county and tribal government and represent the best example of this nation's continuing commitment to Indian Tribes and the self-determination of Indian Tribes.

Thank you for your time and consideration. I look forward to hearing back from you.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Ty R. Wessell". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Ty Wessell
County Commissioner, District 4