

9 August 2024

From:

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To:

Department of the Interior

Office of the Assistant Secretary – Indian Affairs

Attention: Office of Federal Acknowledgement

Mail Stop 4071 MIB

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Washington, DC 20240

Subject:

Support for Tribal Recognition of the Gila Apache (Chihene Nde)

The Gila Apache (Chihene Nde) have historically inhabited communities in west-central and southwest New Mexico. The consolidation of Apache tribes on reservations and the exile of others from New Mexico have had significant adverse impacts. These actions have led to confusion and a loss of public identity for off-reservation Apaches like the Chihene Nde Nation, who have largely remained unnoticed until now. Tribal elders have now directed the next generation to petition the federal government for re-recognition to preserve their ongoing culture.

Scholars have assessed the Chihene Nde Nation over the decades, considering its people to be modern descendants of the Gila Apache, who entered treaties with three nations and agreed to cede land to the U.S. With an unambiguous sovereign political identity and separate history from any current reservation Apache tribe and direct lineage to treaty signers not spoken of in the history of other Apache tribes, the Chihene Nde are a unique people. The petition includes the following points that distinguish the tribe:

- The tribe's leader signed treaties and compiled by confederating their bands into one political identity as the Eastern American Indian tribes
- The existing tribal members descend directly from the treaty signers with the U.S. in 1852, 1853, and 1855.
- After the closing of the Tularosa Valley Indian Agency in 1874, the tribe remained separated in their agricultural villages in the Greater Gila and Mimbres region, Southwest New Mexico along the Rio Grande, and northern Mexico.

- The tribe farmed and ranched in their ancestral territories while maintaining their cultural heritage amidst economic change from a subsistence to a cash economy.
- The tribe had been recognized for almost 80 years before the U.S. government removed its name from the National List of Indian Tribes in 1941.

Additionally, the petition demonstrates an ongoing presence and culture, including traditional language, crafts, and songs. For example, the tribe gathers annually in the tradition of its ancestors, documented in the 1850s by its U.S. Indian Agent, Michael Steck. The tribe has submitted evidence for all seven criteria but should be considered to have had unambiguous previous federal acknowledgment and to be a historical American Indian tribe. Given the tribe's unambiguous previous federal acknowledgment, it should only be assessed on the minimum three criteria described in 25 CFR Part 83.

The government has established an adversarial process that pits one tribe against another based on a false narrative of limited resources and funding. Therefore, in the spirit of transitional justice, the Office of Federal Acknowledgement should also ensure that it does not base its decision exclusively on the opinion of Apache tribes in and outside of the state.

Thank you for your attention to this important matter.

Regards,
Harrison Edward Cook