

~~August 17, 2021~~

UPDATED: April 22, 2022

To Members of Congress:

The undersigned 112 religious and religious freedom organizations write today requesting your support for the Save Oak Flat Act, which would prevent Resolution Copper (a joint venture of two foreign mining companies) from altering the status quo and permanently destroying a sacred sanctuary.

Chi'chil Bitdagoteel, loosely translated as "Oak Flat" in English, is part of the ancestral homelands of not only the Apache, but also the Yavapai, Hopi, Zuni, and many other Tribes in the Southwest. In 2016, it was added to the National Register of Historic Places as a Traditional Cultural Property because for centuries it has been the site of religious and cultural ceremonies, a burial ground, and a place for tribal members to find medicinal plants, food, and water. Just as the Abrahamic faiths hold various parts of Jerusalem as sacred because of unique encounters with G-d, the Apache believe Oak Flat is sacred because it is one place where prayers can go directly to the Creator who gave life to all things.

Once part of the Apache aboriginal lands, Oak Flat currently sits within the Tonto National Forest and on top of a large, low-grade copper deposit. Resolution Copper has sought access to the mineral ore for more than 15 years.¹ After a decade of failing to get a standalone bill through Congress, a land swap was added as a midnight rider to the Carl Levin and Howard P. "Buck" National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2015 (NDAA). Section 3003 of this NDAA requires that Resolution Copper be given Oak Flat and surrounding land in exchange for other parcels of land within sixty (60) days after the Forest Service files a Final Environmental Impact Statement (FEIS). The Trump administration released the FEIS on January 15, 2021, in order to start the sixty (60) day clock, but the Biden administration withdrew it on March 1, 2021, resetting the transfer clock.

The now-withdrawn FEIS found that the damage to Oak Flat and the surrounding area would be "immediate, permanent, and large in scale."² The crater that is anticipated as a result of the mining would be nearly two miles wide and up to 1,100 feet deep.³ To put a crater of that size into perspective, imagine standing on the Speaker's Balcony and looking out over the National Mall. A crater extending

¹ The Eisenhower Administration entered a mineral withdrawal for Oak Flat which prohibits new mining for the area in 1955. Public Land Order 1229 signed Sept. 27, 1955, <https://www.resolutionmineeis.us/documents/20-fr-7336> (last accessed June 23, 2021).

² "Final Environmental Impact Statement Resolution Copper Project and Land Exchange," Vol. III, 3.14.4.9, p. 856, <https://www.resolutionmineeis.us/documents/final-eis> (last accessed June 23, 2021).

³ *Id.*, Vol. I, ES 1.2, p. ES-3: "While all mining would be conducted underground, removing the ore would cause the ground surface to collapse, creating a subsidence area at the Oak Flat Federal Parcel. The crater would start to appear in year 6 of active mining. The crater ultimately would be between 800 and 1,115 feet deep and roughly 1.8 miles across. The Forest Service assessed alternative mining techniques in an effort to prevent subsidence, but alternative methods were considered unreasonable."

almost to the Lincoln Memorial has swallowed America's front yard and many of our most important museums and monuments. It is deep enough that if the Washington Monument stands upright at the bottom, it barely reaches the midway depth of the crater.

The now-withdrawn FEIS summarizes well what is at stake: "Oak Flat is a sacred place to the Western Apache, Yavapai, O'odham, Hopi, and Zuni. It is a place where rituals are performed, and resources are gathered; its loss would be an indescribable hardship to those peoples."⁴

The significance of corporate worship for religious Americans became even more apparent during the pandemic. Many houses of worship temporarily adopted new worship practices to help curb the spread of the coronavirus in their communities. Whether the adaptation was a virtual service, outdoor service, or something in person with masks and proper social distancing, everyone eagerly anticipated the day they could go back to normal to resume worship with fellow believers. Unfortunately for tribal members who hold Oak Flat sacred, the separation from their outdoor sanctuary would not be temporary. If the administration and Congress fail to work together to protect Oak Flat, the Western Apache peoples will suffer the permanent closure and total destruction of their sacred site.

As religious and religious freedom organizations, we support the San Carlos Apache Tribe, the Western Apache tribes, and all others who hold Oak Flat as sacred. We hope you will join us by supporting the Save Oak Flat Act (H.R. 1884/S. 915).

Sincerely,

National Organizations

Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty (BJC)

African American Ministers in Action

Alliance of Baptists

American Baptist Home Mission Societies

American Civil Liberties Union

Bend the Arc: Jewish Action

Christian Legal Society

Church of Scientology National Affairs Office

Congregation of Our Lady of Charity of the Good Shepherd, U.S. Provinces

Congregation of St. Joseph- Peace and Justice Team

Congregation of Sisters of St. Agnes

Cooperative Baptist Fellowship

⁴ *Id.*, Vol. III, 3.14.4.2, p. 837.

Creation Justice Ministries
Dominican Sisters of Hope
The Episcopal Church
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
Faith in Public Life
Franciscan Action Network
Franciscan Sisters of Mary
Franciscan Sisters of the Sacred Heart
Friends Committee on National Legislation
GreenFaith
Hindu American Foundation
Interfaith Power and Light
Islamic Society of North America (ISNA)
Leadership Conference of Women Religious
Mennonite Central Committee U.S.
The National Advocacy Center of the Sisters of the Good Shepherd
National Council of Churches USA
National Council of Jewish Women
NETWORK Lobby for Catholic Social Justice
One Earth Sangha
Pax Christi USA
PCUSA Washington Office of Public Witness and the Ministry at the United Nations
People For The American Way
Progressive National Baptist Convention, Inc.
School Sisters of St. Francis
Secular Franciscan
Seventh-day Adventist Church - North American Division
Sisters of Charity Federation
Sisters of Charity of Nazareth Congregational Leadership
Sisters of Mercy of the Americas Justice Team
Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur

Together for Hope

U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops Committee for Religious Liberty

Union for Reform Judaism

Unitarian Universalists for Social Justice

United Church of Christ Environmental Justice Ministries

United Church of Christ Justice and Local Church Ministries

Wheaton Franciscans JPIC Office

Arizona-based Organizations [* denotes regional organization also operating in other states]

Arizona Faith Network (Phoenix)

Arizona Interfaith Power & Light (Tempe)

AZ Diocese of the Episcopal Church (Phoenix)

Cooperative Baptist Fellowship West* (Tucson)

Desert Southwest Conference, The United Methodist Church* (Phoenix)

DSC Commission on Religion and Race* (Mesa)

The Episcopal Diocese of Arizona Council for Native American Ministry (Phoenix)

Good Shepherd Episcopal Mission* (Fort Defiance)

Good Shepherd of the Hills (Cave Creek)

Grand Canyon Synod-ELCA* (Phoenix)

National Council of Jewish Women Arizona (Scottsdale)

Southwest Conference United Church of Christ* (Phoenix)

St. Andrew's Episcopal Church (Sedona)

Other Organizations

Baptist Fellowship Northeast

Baptist World Alliance

Bread of Life Church (Washington, D.C.)

California Interfaith Power & Light

Center for Faith, Justice, and Reconciliation

Chicago Benedictines for Peace

College Park Baptist Church (Greensboro, NC)

Cooperative Baptist Fellowship Kentucky
Cooperative Baptist Fellowship of Georgia
Cooperating Baptist Fellowship of Oklahoma
Cooperative Baptist Fellowship of Texas
Cooperative Baptist Fellowship of Virginia
District of Columbia Baptist Convention
Dominican Sisters ~ Grand Rapids (MI)
Dominican Sisters in Committed Collaboration
Dominican Sisters of Houston
Evergreen Association of American Baptist Churches
Fellowship Southwest
Florida Council of Churches
Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration
Ginter Park Baptist Church (Richmond, VA)
Greensboro United Church of Christ (Greensboro, VT)
Grey Nuns of the Sacred Heart
Holy Spirit Missionary Sisters, USA-JPIC
Iglesia Bautista Victoria en Cristo (Fort Worth, TX)
IHM Social Justice
Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary
Intercommunity Peace and Justice Center
Mid-Atlantic Cooperative Baptist Fellowship
New Mexico Conference of Churches
New Mexico Interfaith Power and Light
New York Interfaith Power and Light
North Carolina Council of Churches
Occupy Bergen County
Office of Peace, Justice, and Ecological Integrity/Sisters of Charity of St. Elizabeth
Oregon Interfaith Power & Light
Parkway UCC (Winston-Salem, NC)
Partnership for Earth Spirituality

Protect The 1st

Providence Baptist Church (Kernersville, NC)

Second Baptist Church (Little Rock, AR)

Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur EW

Sisters of Saint Francis, Rochester, Minnesota

Sisters of Saint Joseph of Chestnut Hill, Philadelphia, PA

Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet, LA

Social Justice Comm. Congregation Bet Haverim (Davis, CA)

University Baptist Church (Austin, TX)

White Rabbit Grove RDNA

Wilshire Baptist Church (Dallas, TX)