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CA Tribe Has New Recognition Hopes After Costly, Two-Decade Struggle

The once federally recognized Muwekma Ohlone Tribe of the San Francisco Bay Area has fought for more than two decades to regain its rights to sovereignty and resources. It has cost the tribe dearly, even forcing them to abandon their tribal headquarters, but this fight could soon be coming to an end.

The Native American tribe, which has more than 500 members, is currently unrecognized by both the state of California and the federal government. The tribe, which has been struggling to gain recognition since the early 1990s, hopes that potential revisions to the Regulation on Federal Acknowledgement of Indian Tribes will change this. In a May press release, the U.S. Department of Interior said it wants to streamline the federal recognition granting process.

The Muwekma tribe is closely monitoring this potential legislative action and plans to attend a July 22 hearing in Brooks, California, for the proposed revisions. Based on what occurs at the hearing, the tribe hopes to resubmit its own evidence for federal recognition.

Between 1906 and 1928, the tribe had been federally recognized as the Verona Band of Indians of Alameda County and its members have been historically documented as living in the Bay Area since the late 1700s.

In 1927, the tribe and many others were dropped from federal recognition as sovereign Native American nations. This happened after Lafayette Dorrington, the federally assigned Bureau of Indian Affairs agent for the Sacramento Agency, neglected his duties to find land for the tribe and instead chose to unfairly remove them from the federal recognition list, said ethno-historian Alan Leventhal, a lecturer at San Jose State University.

Being a federally recognized tribe means they are eligible for familial and communal assistance. "Tribal members are eligible for a lot of federal programs aimed at Indians," said Collin Hampson, attorney for the Muwekma tribe.

However, these resources come second for Charlene Nijmeh, a Muwekma Ohlone tribal member, who said, "For me, it has nothing to do with that. This is our land, and we have the sovereign right to be here."

One barrier for tribes like the Muwekma is the financial cost of the recognition process.

"Oftentimes, the tribe's petition is lacking sufficient information because they don't have the financial resources necessary to hire the experts needed," said Ada Deer, former assistant secretary of Indian Affairs in the Interior Department.

The recognition process requires tribes to prove Native American descent, usually in the form of expensive genealogy reports. The cost of gathering these reports and filing their petition for federal recognition has forced the Muwekma tribe to close its San Jose offices.

"The tribal administration is basically located within people's homes," Leventhal said.

The Muwekma tribe was informed in March 1998 that their petition was classified as "Ready Status" by the BIA, or ready for active consideration. The tribe then calculated that it would take nearly 24 years to have their petition considered for federal approval. They sued the BIA in December 1999 to speed up the process.

Since this first legal action, the tribe has petitioned for federal recognition multiple times and continues to be denied by the BIA.

Regardless of the struggle Nijmeh doesn't lose hope. "We are always going to be here, but politicians come and go."

The Muwekma Ohlone are not alone. Several other tribes in the Bay Area are looking to be recognized, and for the state of California, 81 tribes are petitioning for recognition, according to the BIA.

Pauly Denetclaw is Diné and of the Haltsooí clan, born for Kinyaa'aanii clan. She is studying mass communication and journalism at the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque with a focus on multimedia journalism and pursuing a minor in Native American studies. Brittney Bennett is a member of the United Keetoowah Band of

Cherokee Indians. She's from Kansas, Oklahoma and attends the University of Oklahoma where she's studying to get her degree in public relations. This article was written for Native Voice, a mentoring program for young Indian journalists held at the National Native Media conference in Santa Clara, California, about five miles from the Muwekma Ohlone tribe, which is based in San Jose.

Full Name:

P. Denetclaw & B. Bennett

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