



For Immediate Release

NCAI Endorses S. 578; Bill Ensures Tribal Participation In Homeland Security Endeavors

The National Congress of American Indians (NCAI) strongly supports S. 578, the Tribal Government Amendments to the Homeland Security Act of 2002. S. 578 is designed to provide tribes with access to programs and information from the Department of Homeland Security and to develop the government-to-government relationship between tribes and the DHS.

Authored by Senator Daniel Inouye (D-HI) in March 2003, S.578 would ensure active participation by tribal governments in national efforts to detect and prevent terrorism.

Tex Hall, National Congress of American Indians president, acknowledged the critical importance of having seamless homeland security measures in place throughout the nation.

“Just like states, tribes have very serious responsibilities for protecting our nation’s borders and infrastructure,” Hall said. “Tribes also have limited resources to address these responsibilities. S. 578 is imperative to ensuring our ability to fully protect our lands and our people from any potential attacks.”

A July 30th hearing before the U.S. Senate Committee on Indian Affairs is scheduled at 2 p.m. in room 216 of the Hart Senate Building. The hearing is designed to provide a forum for developing a better understanding of the homeland security challenges in Indian country and the crucial role tribal governments must play in working with federal, state and local governments to assure that our homeland security network is truly comprehensive in scope.

Homeland Security Background

The Homeland Security Act of 2002 provided authority for the establishment of the Department of Homeland Security to serve as the focal point for the Federal government’s efforts to prevent terrorist attacks, to reduce the nation’s vulnerability to terrorism, and to enhance the capacities of all governments to respond to terrorist threats through the coordination of homeland security activities with state, local and tribal governments. Six priorities were identified in the Act:

- the development of a comprehensive intelligence and warning system to detect terrorism before it manifests itself in an attack;

- domestic counter-terrorism, including the improvement of intergovernmental law enforcement coordination;
- border and transportation security;
- critical infrastructure protection;
- catastrophic terrorism defense; and
- emergency preparedness and response.

As the Federal government begins to build homeland security capacities to meet the threat of terrorism, it is clear that state, local and tribal governments have a critical role to play in homeland security strategies.

Tribal Governments Involvement in Homeland Protection

Tribal governments serve as the primary instrument of law enforcement and emergency response throughout the more than fifty million acres of land that comprise Indian country.

“The defense of vital infrastructure located on or near tribal lands must be recognized as an essential piece of our nation’s security plan,” Hall said. Critical infrastructure located on tribal lands such as energy generating plants, oil and gas pipelines, rail and highway corridors, dams and water reservoirs and communications towers, could be potential targets. The proximity of Indian lands to international borders, military installations, and population centers must also be taken into consideration during protection and defense development plans.

“The exclusion of tribal governments in implementation of a national homeland security strategy places both Indian and non-Indian populations at risk,” Hall said.

Hall said tribal governments, like state governments, need the necessary resources to develop procedures and plans to respond to threats of terrorism, including access to information and advisory systems, emergency preparedness and planning activities, law enforcement data bases, and health alert systems related to the possible use of germ, chemical and biological warfare.