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Senate Unanimously Passes Bill to Return Land to Nebraska's Winnebago Tribe



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WASHINGTON – Today, the U.S. Senate unanimously passed the bipartisan [Winnebago Land Transfer Act](#), introduced by U.S. Senator Deb Fischer (R-Neb.) and cosponsored by Senator Pete Ricketts (R-Neb.).

The legislation would transfer approximately 1,600 acres of land back to the Winnebago Tribe of Nebraska that were illegally seized in the 1970s by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. The bill now heads to the President's desk.

“The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers was wrong to seize this land through eminent domain in the 1970s. It’s time to make this right and finally return this land to the Winnebago Tribe of Nebraska. I want to thank my colleagues for their unanimous, bipartisan support, and I look forward to seeing this bill signed into law.” **said Senator Fischer.**

“The Army Corps of Engineers’ decision to condemn and seize land from the Winnebago Tribe of Nebraska was a classic case of government overreach. I’m grateful the Senate passed our bill to correct this wrong and ensure the land is returned to the Winnebago people. I urge President Biden to sign it,” **said Senator Ricketts.**

“This is a truly historic moment for the Winnebago Tribe as lands that were taken from us over 50 years ago will soon be restored to the Tribe. Our ancestors, including the late Louis LaRose, fought tirelessly to secure and protect our homelands. The Tribal Council is honored to carry on their work and help send this bill to the President in their honor. The Tribe will be forever grateful to Senator Fischer, Senator Grassley, Senator Ricketts, and Senator Ernst for *aikiruti*, standing arm in arm, with the Winnebago through this momentous effort,” **said Chairwoman of the Winnebago Tribe of Nebraska Victoria Kitcheyan.**

At a Senate Indian Affairs Committee [hearing in February](#), Senator Fischer introduced the Chairwoman Kitcheyan to testify in support of the Winnebago Land Transfer Act.

Background:

The Treaty of 1865 established the Winnebago Reservation in northeastern Nebraska along the Missouri River. Due to westward shifts in the river, portions of the reservation are now in Iowa.

In 1970, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (the Corps) was performing stabilization efforts on the Missouri River’s banks and condemned land on both the Nebraska and Iowa sides of the river for a proposed recreation project. The condemned land included tracts of reservation land in Iowa. The Corps filed eminent domain proceedings to acquire the land, triggering years of legal challenges.

Ultimately, the Nebraska tract of land was returned to the Tribe. However, both tracts of land in Iowa that were taken remain under the Corps’ jurisdiction today and are maintained by the Iowa Department of Natural Resources (DNR). Neither the Iowa DNR nor the Corps has objection to the Tribe regaining control of the land. The latest renewal agreement of the license between the Iowa DNR and the Corps includes a provision that anticipates the return of the land to the Tribe.

Senator Fischer’s Winnebago Land Transfer Act would transfer administrative jurisdiction of the approximately 1,600 acres from the Army Corps of Engineers to the Bureau of Indian Affairs to hold in trust for the Winnebago Tribe of Nebraska.

In addition to Senators Fischer and Ricketts, the legislation is cosponsored by Senators Chuck Grassley (R-Iowa) and Joni Ernst (R-Iowa).

U.S. Representative Randy Feenstra (R-Iowa) led the bill in the House of Representatives, which passed it by voice vote on February 5, 2024. In addition to Congressman Feenstra, the legislation is cosponsored by U.S. Representatives Mike Flood (R-Neb.), Adrian Smith (R-

Neb.), Don Bacon (R-Neb.), Zachary Nunn (R-Iowa), Sharice Davids (D-Kan.), Mariannette Miller-Meeks (R-Iowa), and Ashley Hinson (R-Iowa).