



Notes from the Chief

What I'm working on for You

Osiyo -

Protecting the environment and our precious natural resources are priorities for me as Chief of America's largest tribal nation. Through our traditional values we embrace our natural world. It's so important to me and the Cherokee people that we recently named the tribe's first ever Secretary of Natural Resources. This will ensure the next seven generations of Cherokee people have continued access to all that we have today – clean air, abundant fresh water and fertile land where we can grow our crops and raise our livestock.

Sadly, State Question 777 contradicts what we hold so dearly for our air and water and land. The proposed change would add a new section to the Oklahoma Constitution that would prevent our elected policymakers from passing any law that "abridges the right of farmers and ranchers to employ agricultural technology and livestock production and ranching practices without a compelling state interest." However, Oklahoma law already protects farmers, and this constitutional amendment is not needed.

Corporate farming interests want to use our state and our valuable resources without being subject to any state regulation or oversight. That's irresponsible, and all of us have a God-given obligation to protect what we hold so dearly.

Oklahoma has already seen polluted water from concentrated animal feeding operations. There is no reason to believe that tying the hands of the legislature will make Oklahomans more safe or prosperous.

We have to take our stewardship of our world and our future seriously. As our Cherokee elders have taught us and we must teach our children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren, Mother Earth is what sustains us all and God has created us to live in harmony with the rest of creation.

This proposed constitutional amendment will only serve to shield that small percentage of corporate agricultural operators who seek profit at the expense of others and will deplete our natural resources. State Question 777 would allow a large and poorly run hog operation to move in next door to your family's farm, and there will be no recourse for the contamination of your water or the depletion of your resources. There may not be a compelling state interest involved, leaving your family's investment and land utterly destroyed.

Unregulated practices could happen on land next door to our jurisdiction and affect land, water and wildlife located inside the Cherokee Nation in the heart of Indian Country.

Locally here in Oklahoma, we have witnessed the gradual demise of family agriculture as a result of the modern movement of mass-grown food production. In typical fashion, proponents of this issue are cloaking it in buzz words that will appeal and confuse voters. Oklahomans already have the right to farm. This is about a larger profit for a small amount of corporate agricultural companies, pure and simple.

In essence, it would not only take away the power of the legislature and municipal governments to regulate agricultural practices and our rights to legal recourse, it effectively takes away the power of the people to vote on changes.

Things in the agricultural world change, and this amendment would hamper our abilities to respond to new threats. In the 1920s, state farmers tilled up huge swaths of land in the Oklahoma panhandle to grow wheat. Then in the 1930s, Oklahomans began to realize this common agricultural practice was leading the entire country toward an environmental disaster. Lawmakers were able to respond. With this constitutional amendment, the Oklahoma legislature will be unable to make new laws to protect Oklahoma citizens from agricultural practices that are hurting Oklahoma families and communities.

Even if the legislature does make a new law to protect Oklahomans, they may find themselves hopelessly tied up in court against big agricultural companies and conglomerates who are happy to waste taxpayer money on frivolous litigation while their companies continue to rake in huge profits at the expense of ordinary Oklahomans. As anyone can see from looking at the Illinois River litigation, courts are no place to get quick answers to important questions when your community is being impacted by pollution.

This state question is designed to be exploited by huge agribusiness and corporate farms. Dodging oversight and polluting our land and water are not in the heart of what an Oklahoma farmer is all about, and they are most definitely not at the heart of what it is to be Cherokee.

I hope you will join me in voting no against 777 in November.

Bill John Baker

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Bill John Baker". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.



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