

Boxer Statement on the Introduction of the Gold Hill-Wakamatsu Preservation Act

August 6, 2009

Mr. President- I rise to discuss the Gold Hill-Wakamatsu Preservation Act. This legislation would authorize the Bureau of Land Management to acquire and manage the Gold Hill Ranch near Coloma, California. This site was the location of the Wakamatsu Tea and Silk Colony from 1869 to 1971, recognized by the State of California and Japanese American Citizens League as the first Japanese settlement in the United States.

After Commodore William Perry opened Japanese ports to U.S. trade, the weakness of Japan's shoguns was exposed, leading to a revolution and return to imperial rule under the Meiji emperor. In 1869, seven Japanese individuals and a European expatriate fled the turmoil in Japan and sailed across the Pacific to San Francisco aboard a side wheeler called the "China." The group made their way eastwards and purchased land in Gold Hill. Within two years, the colony grew to 22 Japanese settlers and began producing traditional Japanese crops such as tea, silk, rice, and bamboo. The Japanese colonists and surrounding community learned about each others' culture and agricultural techniques. Local and San Francisco newspapers wrote about the colony, and the settlers began to receive acceptance in American society.

Unfortunately, the colony was short-lived – drought and financial problems forced the group to disperse and settle throughout California beginning in 1871. The Veerkamp family, which owned neighboring lands, purchased the property in 1875. Despite the short history of the colony, it was an important milestone that helped bridge Japanese and American cultures and pave the way for large-scale emigration of Japanese settlers to the United States. It also contributed to major Japanese influences on the agricultural economy of California.

Many of the original structures on the site remain intact, including a farmhouse, the grave of a young girl named Okei, numerous artifacts, and agricultural plantings. Japanese-Americans and other visitors come to see the site and place offerings on Okei's grave. As a testament to the cultural exchanges that occurred at this site, the Gold Trail Middle School, located on an in holding carved out of this site, now maintains an exchange program with a sister school in Wakamatsu, Japan. Governor Reagan recognized the property as a state historic site in 1969, and the site is currently being considered for listing on the National Register of Historic Places.

The 272-acre ranch encompassing the original colony site has been passed down for generations through the Veerkamp family. Thanks to the hard work of the American River Conservancy and Wakamatsu Gold Hill Colony Foundation as well as the generous accommodation of the Veerkamp family, the site has been preserved for visitors to come and learn about the history of the Wakamatsu colonists and Japanese-American culture. The site provides multiple other benefits, including wildlife habitat, open space with numerous hiking trails and picnic areas, and grazing and pastureland. The family and non-profit partners agree that federal acquisition would help guarantee that the site's cultural history, agricultural character, and open space are permanently preserved for generations to come. The Bureau of Land Management is well-suited to manage this site since it has an excellent relationship with the local community and manages several other sites nearby.

This project is supported by the Japanese American Citizens League, the National Japanese American Historical Society, the Consul General of Japan, the Governor of Fukushima Prefecture and the Mayor of Wakamatsu in Japan, People-to-People International, the El Dorado County Board of Supervisors, the El Dorado County Chamber of Commerce, numerous elected officials including Assemblyman Ted Gaines, who represents this district, and numerous other members of the local community.

The significance of this site for Japanese Americans has been compared to the significance of the Mayflower journey and Plymouth Rock landing for European Americans. This site is testament to Japanese history, California's agricultural economy, and the American tradition of bringing together people of diverse cultures in the common pursuit of freedom and prosperity. I look forward to working with my Senate colleagues to move this legislation and preserve the story of the Wakamatsu colonists for future generations.