

H.733: An act relating to the use of migratory bird feathers for cultural or ceremonial purposes.

American Indians have a rich religious culture filled with traditions that date back thousands of years. Unfortunately our religious practices were hindered by the misunderstanding of Europeans over the years about our culture. When policies and laws were enacted, the religious freedoms of the Native American culture was not taken into account. Several laws were passed by the government in an attempt to protect wildlife and inadvertently made certain parts of our religious practices to become illegal or blurred in the eyes of the law. One of these such laws involves the possession and use of Non-Game species bird feathers and parts. To correct this at the Federal level, the Department of Justice created a policy called "The Morton Policy" to allow Native Americans to possess Federally protected bird feathers and parts for religious and ceremonial purposes in line with the American Indian Religious Freedom Act which is listed below. Eagle feathers are our connection to the creator and is like our crucifix to catholics. The Hawk is like the son, and the Owl is our Holy Ghost who flies between this world and the spirit world. These feathers are very important to our religious practices but there is nothing if Vermont State Law that allows us to legally possess these feathers and no mechanism for the Vermont Fish and Wildlife Service to transfer these salvaged feathers to us for our religious practices. State Agencies want to support us. Both the Fish and Wildlife service and the Native Tribes of Vermont are asking that you pass this legislation to allow us to practice our religious freedoms without worry of prosecution and give us the right to possess Bird feathers under Vermont Statute.

The American Indian Religious Freedom Act, Public Law No. 95-341, 92 Stat. 469 (Aug. 11, 1978) (commonly abbreviated to AIRFA), codified at 42 U.S.C. § 1996, is a United States federal law and a joint resolution of Congress that was passed in 1978. It was enacted to protect and preserve the traditional religious rights and cultural practices of American Indians, Eskimos, Aleuts, and Native Hawaiians. These rights include, but are not limited to, access of sacred sites, freedom to worship through ceremonial and traditional rights and use and possession of objects considered sacred. The Act required policies of all governmental agencies to eliminate interference with the free exercise of Native religion, based on the First Amendment, and to accommodate access to and use of religious sites to the extent that the use is practicable and is not inconsistent with an agency's essential functions. It also acknowledges the prior violation of that right,

Waolowzi (Be Very Well),
Don Stevens, Chief
Nulhegan Band of the Coosuk - Abenaki Nation